

‘My Life. My Card.’TM

A Textual Analysis of the Role of
Print Advertising in the Sign Value Construction
Process of the AMERICAN EXPRESS® Cards

by Fabíola Campos da Silva



MA Thesis in Media Studies
Faculty of Humanities,
Department of Media and Communication (IMK)

UNIVERSITY OF OSLO

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Supervised by Synne Skjulstad



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Department of Media and Communication (IMK)

University of Oslo, Norway

Abstract

'Membership Has Its Privileges' (1987 – 1996), *'My Life. My Card.'* (2004 – 2007) and *'Realise the Potential'* (2009 – 2012) are just a few of the print ad-campaigns for the American Express cards that over the years have helped construct the sign value of its charge cards as 'the cards of the rich and affluent'. By conducting a diachronic (focusing on the changes over time) poststructuralist textual analysis of a sample consisting of the three aforementioned print ad-campaigns, and using semiotics as my main theoretical framework, I explore the mechanisms and signs American Express uses in order to convey its cards as symbols of distinction and success. The research reveals that the company has used different approaches in order to appeal to its targets in the different periods of time to meet the goals of their marketing plans and adapt to new socio-economic realities. In the first campaign of the sample, by mainly using celebrities and their referent systems, the American Express cards are portrayed as the entrance keys to a selective club. In the second campaign, the company shows a different side of celebrities, distancing them from the glamorized ideal normally associated with the celebrity lifestyle. In this specific campaign, the American Express card is conveyed as an instrument that allows people to conciliate their busy professional lives with what really matters – their family lives. The last campaign of the sample has been deeply influenced by the digital revolution. In this latest period in time the company immerses itself in the new medium and allows the readers to create and print and/or share on Facebook their own personalized print ad, taking the relationship between advertising and the individual to a whole different level and also marking the introduction of the company into the digital/convergence era. At this point, the American Express card is portrayed as *your* card, which *you* can count on to help fulfill *your* wants and needs, whatever they might be. As confirmed by the results, advertising is a dynamic practice, which is constantly evolving and creating new methods of persuasion and adapting to new time frames and technologies.

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Contents

Introduction	1
Research Background	4
Research Objectives	5
Research Outline	6
 Chapter 1: Advertising & Consumer Culture	8
1.1. Consumer Culture: A Brief Background	8
1.2. Advertising: Introduction	10
1.3. Advertising and the Individual	12
1.3.1. The Construction of Sign Value	14
1.3.2. Intertextuality	16
1.3.3. Appealing to the Upper-Class	18
1.4. Advertising and Ideology	20
 Chapter 2: From Credit to American Express Cards	23
2.1. Selling Credit	23
2.2. The American Express Cards' Print Ad-Campaigns	27
2.2.1. 1974 – 1987: 'Do You Know Me?'	28
2.2.2. 1987 – 1996: 'Membership Has Its Privileges.'	28
2.2.3. 1996 – 2004: 'Do More.'	30
2.2.4. 2004 – 2007: 'My Life. My Card.'	31
2.2.5. 2007 – 2009: 'Are You a Cardmember?'	33
2.2.6. 2009 – 2012: 'Realise the Potential.'	35
 Chapter 3: Methodology & Theoretical Framework	37
3.1. Analyzing the Print Ad-Campaigns: methods	37
3.1.1. Gathering the Material	38
3.1.2. Selecting the Ad-Campaigns	39

3.1.3. A Poststructuralist Textual Analysis of Advertising Pieces -----	40
3.2. Theoretical Overview -----	42
3.2.1. A Brief Introduction to Semiotics -----	43
3.2.1.a. Saussure vs. Peirce -----	43
3.2.1.b. Modes of Signs -----	45
3.2.1.c. Codes -----	45
3.2.1.d. Connotation and Denotation -----	46
3.2.1.e. Myth -----	47
3.2.2. Rhetorical Figures -----	48
 Chapter 4: Textual Analysis -----	50
4.1. 1987 – 1996: ‘Membership Has Its Privileges.’ -----	50
4.1.1. The Use of Celebrities -----	51
4.1.2. The Absent Male -----	53
4.1.3. Nature as a Referent System -----	56
4.1.4. Cultural Capital -----	59
4.1.5. Summary: Employing Myths -----	60
4.2. 2004 – 2007: ‘My Life. My Card.’ -----	62
4.2.1. ‘Keeping it Real’ -----	63
4.2.2. Humor -----	66
4.2.3. Absence -----	69
4.2.4. Memories and Values -----	70
4.2.5. Summary: Humanizing Celebrities -----	73
4.3. 2009 – 2012: ‘Realise the Potential.’ -----	74
4.3.1. Rhetorical Figures -----	75
4.3.2. Hailing to the Reader -----	78
4.3.3. Color -----	82
4.3.4. Typography -----	85
4.3.5. Focus on the Advantages -----	87
4.3.6. Summary: Appealing to the Reader in the Convergence Era -----	89

Chapter 5: Research Findings & Implications---	91
Conclusion -----	96
References -----	98
Books & Articles -----	98
Images -----	101
Online -----	103

“Don’t Leave Home Without It.”
(Tag line introduced in 1975 by advertising icon David Ogilvy)

Introduction

Over the past centuries the Western world has seen the rise and consolidation of the capitalist systems and its values and mechanisms. We have experienced tremendous technological advances and exponential increases in material wealth production. Capitalism's capacity for growth is undoubtedly tied to the legitimacy that money (i.e. symbolic currency) has acquired under it, to the point of becoming a virtue in itself. The system of capitalism ultimately challenged social and religious perceptions on the gathering of material goods. An activity that was previously deemed sinful was reinterpreted into something positive out of economic necessity.

The switch from barter to coin around 700 BC, the invention of checks in the twelfth century, the shift to paper money in the seventeenth century, and the introduction of payment cards, are the four greatest innovations in monetary transactions ever seen (Evans and Schmalensee: 2005, 5). The credit card is today the ultimate instrument of the capitalist economy to satisfy its dependents' needs of gathering goods. The seductive power of the card lies in the facilities it provides compared to currency. It allows the cardholder to satisfy their immediate needs without having accumulated the necessary funds beforehand. When reinforced actively through advertising, the credit card is also seen by contemporary Western society as having social significance and status, where credit is equated with funds. This relationship also extends to businesses that give incentives for people to pay with credit, secure in the knowledge that the credit card company will immediately pay them regardless of the customer's ability to pay the credit card company later on. Nearly all the risk is thus passed onto the credit card company. This is the point at which the credit card assumes its empty nature. As with all instruments of credit, there are inherent risks for those who grant it, in turn expressed by high interest rates.

From here on in, the endless accumulation of material and economic wealth became a major motivation and desire for most human beings. It is in this desire that resides the essence and strength of capitalism, a system that perpetually invents new mechanisms to ensure and justify its continued existence - tools that enable people to fulfill invented desires by consuming. According to Leiss (1983), the meaning of goods cannot be understood by reference to their characteristic qualities or

predetermined use, but rather they become subjected to a continuous process of symbolization and re-symbolization. Advertising has a central role in this regard, and capitalism depends on it to wake the desires of consumers, and to inform prospective new consumers of the existence of new necessities. Analyzing the evolution of the role played by credit cards and advertising, we can observe in a microcosm, the logic of the existence of the capitalist model. As Ron Beasley and Marcel Danesi (2002) tell us:

The central idea behind modern-day advertising is that the appeal and salability of any product or service that is promoted in the marketplace, even in the most rudimentary fashion, are greatly enhanced. The craft of advertising today has, however, progressed considerably beyond the use of simple techniques for announcing the availability of products or services. It has ventured, in fact, into the domain of persuasion, and its theoretical categories have become omnipresent in contemporary social discourse – i.e. in the content and delivery of the meanings that people living in a society exchange on a daily basis. (Beasley and Danesi, 2002:1)

Credit card companies rely on advertising not just to sell their products but for the creation of brand recognition and aggregated values associated with them. The American Express Company, which started as an express delivery business in New York in 1850, is today one of the most renowned credit card companies. Since the issuing of its first charge card in 1958, American Express has been associated with prestige and status. With advertising campaigns such as *'Membership Has Its Privileges'* from 1987 to 1996 and *'My Life. My Card.'* from 2004 to 2007, the company sells its ideals, building a high profile image. Possessing the American Express card does not just give access to immediate credit, but also to an exclusive club, full of advantages, glamour and prominence.

When selling credit cards, advertising tactically circumvents any focus on the risks of being a cardholder, instead emphasizing its unique characteristic of being the ultimate possession in contemporary capitalism. According to the advertising, it not only allows its users immediate access to credit¹, but also grants them automatic admission into a particular lifestyle, which may not necessarily match their socio-economic realities. Those lifestyles are the products of intense advertising and marketing efforts and serve the purpose of creating sign value for their products – i.e.

¹ Although American Express cards are not yet as widely used in Norway as in the USA, according to americanexpress.no [last accessed on June 8th 2013], the number of cardmembers in Norway has recently reached 85.000 and this number continues to grow on a monthly basis.

the aggregated qualities created by those efforts in order to set them apart from their main competitors (Bolin: 2005, 292), thus attracting the right customers to the different credit card companies.

In this context of idealized lifestyles and constructed images, the American Express Card, or simply *The Card*, becomes the symbol *par excellence* of advertising's power in the creation of sign value – it manages to empty their primary purpose while recreating them as symbols of prestige, success and exclusivity. Just like a membership card to a fancy club, an American Express card gives instant access to high profile benefits and lifestyles. However, the creation of those meanings is only possible with the active participation of the readers (Williamson: 1978, 40-42). Advertising's persuasive power only goes as far as to manipulate and exploit signs in order to obtain a preferred reading of an advert.

With this in mind, it becomes extremely relevant to map out and expose the mechanisms and changes in how advertising tries to establish communication with consumers. As will be discussed throughout this research, advertising is far from being an inert practice, and has always revolved around finding new ways to mobilize consumers. Its evolution has always been linked to the advent of new technologies and changes in society. In an age where digitalization has dramatically restructured the communication process by allowing information to be sent across different platforms, it becomes ever more important to unmask and create literacy about the new techniques advertisers have developed in order to take advantage of and incorporate those new technologies. Hence the importance of exploring how the relatively recent digital revolution has affected the ways in which a traditional company such as American Express communicates with their prospective and current customers through advertising. The interpretation of the ad's message is done completely by each individual reader and may vary widely according to socio-economic variables such as education, age, gender, etc. The primary purpose of my research is to examine and analyze how this interpretation process occurs and consequently find out how the print ad campaigns function in order to create the American Express cards' sign value. I want to explore how the global print ad campaigns make use of signs with the purpose of adding status value to their products. In order to do so, I will perform a diachronic poststructuralist textual analysis of a sample of three global print ad campaigns for the American Express card, founded upon a semiotic framework. As pointed out by Hall (Hall in Hall et al.

(ed.): 1980, 109), the meaning of a given message is dependant upon the symmetry between the codes used by the encoder and the receiver and may significantly vary. So by using this specific methodology together with semiotics, it allows me to consider the different possible interpretations of the American Express ad campaigns based on both my knowledge in the field as a researcher as well as that of an active member of contemporary Western consumer culture.

Research Background

Having grown up in Brazil, a country with even greater socioeconomic differences than that of the United States where the American Express company is based, I would often see ads on TV, in shop windows or in newspapers and magazines, where credit cards were featured prominently next to the products people were trying to sell. So much so that nearly every ad for a product costing a significant amount of money would for all intents and purposes also be an ad for a credit card company. Not only would the credit cards help sell products in a market where disposable income and trust toward payment was low, but they would become a staple for Brazilians in the same way debit cards are used in place of cash to buy everyday items in rich parts of the world today. To date, credit cards are perhaps the most important instrument of consumption in my home country. The ability to split purchases into five, twelve or more installments without the usual high interest rates has helped drive sales of both goods and services.

American Express has always catered to a select group, and I remember how this fascinated me as a teenager, and how I would beg my mother for an American Express credit card. Later on, I became interested in the creative and social aspects of advertising and was excited and amused by its methods, often employing humor to turn credit cards into something more than plastic cards with borrowed money on them. I was astounded by the social, cultural and economic influence these cards wielded.

As an adult I chose to study social communication and opted for advertising as my major. In the very first years of my studies I was taught to take advertising pieces apart, to analyze them, and to think critically about the choices of signs used in their content in order to open an interaction with the readers. As will be explored in depth

and demonstrated throughout this work, there is absolutely nothing random about these choices. Rather, they are the result of extensive marketing research whose purpose it is to get inside the mind of the target consumers (i.e. their life aspirations, their expectations towards the product, their habits, etc.). These massive efforts aim at better communicating the values created to a certain product and go far beyond conveying its physical utilities. It is within those massive efforts that lies the secret of advertising's persuasion – they allow signs to be rearranged in order to reflect to us our wants and needs, thus creating and giving meaning² to a given product.

Once I had written my BA monograph on advertising and its importance to the imagery of credit cards, I began to ponder the greater ramifications of what I had written, as well as how advertising managed to effectively repackage credit cards and sell them as coveted commodities and status symbols, rather than mere instruments. For this MA thesis, I focus my research on the American Express company, since their ad campaigns have always successfully accomplished to do exactly that - to portray their cards as symbols of success and prestige. I would also like to take this research one step further and examine the transformational powers of advertising applied over an extended period of time, in order to be able to compare the different approaches applied into portraying their cards and see not only how they reflect the changes and expectations of their customers, but how it helped the company build the sign value of their cards.

Research Objectives

By conducting a diachronic textual analysis of a sample of three American Express cards' printed ad-campaigns (i.e. by focusing on their development over time) and using semiotics as the main theoretical framework, I seek to achieve the following with the present research:

- 1. Analyze the different signs and techniques present in the American Express cards' print campaigns, as well as explore their possible meanings.*

² As explained by Williamson (1977, 40-41), advertisings' speech is set in a way to recruit the receiver as an active participant on the meaning creation process, which can only be achieved by the manipulation of signs that in turn are significant to the receivers of the message.

2. *Analyze how the print ad-campaigns empty the American Express cards of their primary meaning in order to re-sell them as coveted items.*
3. *Discover how the selected print campaigns reflect the changes in consumers' desires and expectations towards both themselves and the product, and consequently how they help the American Express company build the sign value of their charge cards over the years.*

Research Outline

In order to fulfill the research objectives in the clearest possible way, I introduce the main concepts and theories concerning my research in Chapter 1, as well as provide a more detailed context to the main issues discussed throughout this work, such as the role of advertising in the construction of sign value and the main practices used in the print campaigns. I start with a brief introduction to our contemporary Western consumer culture, with the objective of outlining the background to subsequently introduce the main subject of this work, advertising, and its relationship between the two major concepts intrinsically related to it – the individual and ideology.

In Chapter 2, I present the objects of this research, the American Express print campaigns, as well as give a brief introduction to the inception of credit and its effects on both economic and social relations, its evolution from the introduction of the first credit cards on the market in the fifties, up to the creation of the American Express cards. By doing this, I want to illustrate the socio-economic changes and circumstances which allowed the transformation of credit from its original form into credit cards. In a few words, the purpose of this chapter is to chronologically present all the campaigns up to date³, sketch the origins of credit card as a commodity, and illustrate the socio-economic context which allowed its introduction onto the market. Doing so, I wish to enable the reader to acquire a deeper understanding of the product, i.e. credit cards, in a broader sense before leading him/her to the analysis.

In Chapter 3, I explain both the methods and theoretical overviews used in the analysis. I also explain how I gathered the materials and why I chose the three ad campaigns in the sample to be analyzed in the following chapter.

³ Note to the reader: the selection of the campaigns took place between the years 2008 and 2012.

Finally in Chapter 4, I turn the focus back to the print ad-campaigns by performing a textual analysis of the selected ones. By applying a poststructuralist approach to concrete cases, I sought to thoroughly explore and map the different elements present in each ad-campaign, as well as their possible meanings.

In Chapter 5, I present my research findings, answer the research questions proposed in this very chapter as well as discuss the research implications. This chapter is followed by the conclusion , where I sum up and finalize the research.

Chapter 1

Advertising & Consumer Culture

In this chapter I will draw the background for my research. Here, I explain the main concepts and theories behind the mechanisms of the advertising business as well as shed some light on its relation to the individual and ideology.

1.1. Consumer Culture: A Brief Background

The shift from industrial culture to consumer culture started in the end of the 1920's when there was a need to sell the surplus of goods that followed the massive boost of manufacturing that had occurred during World War II. This shift was characterized by the beginning of the integration between advertising and new technologies (e.g. radio, press, etc.) and the development of a new mentality that revolved around goods (Leiss et al.: 2005, 68). As explained by Kline and Leiss (1978, 13), the term 'Consumer Culture' is used to indicate a 'network of expectations and aspirations that form the broader context of specific consumption activities'. Those expectations and aspirations are deeply related to the symbolic meanings attached to goods by advertising and marketing efforts, where consumers are encouraged to engage in consumption as a social activity and communicate themselves to the rest of the world through the manipulation of those symbolic meanings (Nava et al. (ed.): 1997, 340). In this perspective, the act of consumption is not only connected to the purchase of goods, but also intrinsically related to identity construction and is seen as a communication process. The distress caused by mass-production is overcome by the need of goods to signalize distinction, not only between individuals, but also between social classes (Bourdieu: 1980; Leiss et al.: 2005, 85). Advertising then persuades

consumers to buy specific brands and goods in order to convey a lifestyle⁴ and not because of their instrumental value (i.e. their primary use). Also, consumers become a central part in the message system, which is translated by the increased emphasis on images that portray ‘self-satisfaction, individual gratification and living life in the moment with openness to change’ (ibid. 87) and by the insertion of those images in natural and cultural scenarios. Traditions no longer dictated how one should manage their needs and desires with the available goods and this activity was instead taken over by the marketplace. This new strategy marked the transition from an industrial-based society to a consumer society.

According to Campbell (ibid. 340-341), there are five interrelated premises that back up the communication approach of consumption: (1) the study of consumption should focus on the symbolic meaning of goods; (2) consumers are well aware of those meanings and base their purchase on them; (3) the act of consumption is a deliberate act to manipulate the symbolic meanings of goods in order to make a certain statement or send a message to others; (4) those messages are related to identity and lifestyle and (5) the reason why those messages are sent is so consumers can gain recognition and affirmation of those identities. Still, according to the author, this communicative level of consumption, i.e. the fact that people consume in order to communicate their lifestyle, is why consumption is not studied as a physical event (i.e. as money being exchanged for goods and services), but as a symbolic act, where individuals carefully construct themselves through the possession of goods and their symbolic meanings. In order to make clear Campbell’s argument, I will use the very object of this research as an example. If one carries an American Express card, one is not only carrying a credit card (i.e. a plastic object that grants you a limited amount of credit), but one becomes part of the symbolic universe created to distinguish those who carry an American Express from those who carry a Visa or a MasterCard, for example. There is a specific lifestyle that is associated with carrying an American Express card and those who do it are aware of it and use it as a symbol to communicate this lifestyle to others who are also aware of its symbolic value⁵. It is in the recognition (i.e. in the fact that others recognize the American Express as a

⁴ For the purposes of this research, I shall use Holt’s (1997, 343) definition of lifestyle as ‘[a] symbolic expression of collectivities that, through relational differences with other collectivities, map the cultural content of important social categories in particular social contexts.’

⁵ This reminds us to the very basic communication model, that affirms that in order for the message to be successfully sent, both actors (i.e. the addresser and the addressee) must share a common language. This topic will be discussed later on this chapter.

symbol of the rich and affluent) that lies the confirmation sought by the American Express card carrier that he is indeed part of that specific lifestyle. As explained by Holt (1997, 343), since consumption is a social activity, lifestyles enable those with similar consumption patterns and values to associate among themselves, while distancing themselves from those with different consumption patterns. This very process is what perpetuates collectivity.

1.2. Advertising: Introduction

Several posters promoting rewards and the availability of properties found in the ruins of ancient societies are believed to be examples of the first print adverts in the world. These posters were found in the remains of Theban and Roman societies and date back to around 1000 BC (Beasley and Danesi: 2002, 4). Today, advertising has become much more than a way of communicating the availability of products and services, and has ventured deeply into the field of persuasion and social discourse, changing not only the perception of commodities and services, but also the dynamics of communication.

In a few words, advertising can be defined as a form of communication with the ultimate purpose of selling commodities and services. Following the argument of Vestergaard and Schröder (1985, 14), all studies regarding communication have as their primary focus the analysis of text, which is a structured unit that exists in a particular context and communicates meaning. Just like in any other communication process, advertising involves two or more people – the person speaking (i.e. the addresser) and the person who is spoken to (i.e. the addressee). Meaning is then passed on from the addresser to the addressee by a common code (e.g. the English language in print adverts) and is always situated within both actors' cultural context and is representative of their shared knowledge about their position within it (ibid.). What basically sets advertising apart as a distinct form of salesmanship is that it is mediated, meaning that it happens through the intermediary of a medium (e.g. newspaper, TV, magazine, etc.). It is important here to make clear that advertising does not create meaning, but rather supplies a realm where pre-existing structures of meanings can be reassembled for a specific purpose (Goldman: 1987, 693; Williamson: 1978, 101).

The first major change in advertising production came in the 15th century with the introduction of the press by Johann Gutenberg, allowing advertising messages to reach the masses quickly and inexpensively (Beasley and Danesi: 2002, 5). By the end of the 17th century, when newspapers started circulating widely, advertising was sent together with newspaper publications. According to Beasley and Danesi (2002, 5-6), this revolutionized the way in which print messages were understood, as can be seen in the following passage:

Print introduces a level of abstraction that forces people to separate the maker of knowledge from the knowledge made. [...] Before printed knowledge became widespread, humans lived primarily in oral cultures, based on the spoken word. The human voice cannot help but convey emotion, overtly or implicitly. So, the kind of consciousness that develops in people living in oral cultures is shaped by the emotionality of the voice. [...] On the other hand, in print cultures, the kind of consciousness that develops is shaped by the written page, with its edges, margins, and sharply defined characters organized in neatly-layered rows or columns, inducing a linear-rational way of thinking in people.

The fact that the addresser is not present at the moment the addressee receives the message, makes the understanding of it more objective, because it lacks emotionality. As a consequence of the establishment of the print culture, advertising texts started being seen as rational representation of factual qualities. In the 19th century, as a consequence of industrialization, the presentation of the ad became essential in order to persuade the reader. Boring and uninteresting layouts and texts were replaced by visually appealing ones and shorter sentences along with tailored texts were introduced to better fit the announcer's needs (ibid. 7). Persuasive techniques such as repetition, slogans and neologisms were then introduced. Also around the same time period, advertising agencies started to pop up around the world, and professionals were hired to take care of business promotions and advertising campaigns to make consumers relate to their products.

Due to mass-production and an oversaturated market with almost identical products in the 1920's, advertising had become less and less rational and ever more loaded with emotional appeals. Its focus changed from the tangible qualities of the products to the attributes associated with them, such as lifestyle, freedom and status. As argued by Beasley and Danesi (ibid. 11-13), in this new context two concepts

became essential: positioning and image-creation⁶. The former refers to addressing the product to the right target group and the latter to creating a ‘personality’ with which the consumer can identify. However, as argued by Vestergaard and Schröder (1985, 49), advertising still faces two problems while trying to achieve its purpose: how to get the reader’s attention and how to keep him interested in what is being said. With this in mind, the authors suggest that adverts should follow five premises: (1) attract attention, (2) arouse interest, (3) stimulate desire, (4) create conviction and (5) get action. Due to new techniques in marketing (e.g. different kinds of marketing research) advertisers were then able to not only further divide the market based on age, income and occupation, but also based on moods, attitudes and consumption patterns, which allowed them to better position products while creating the right image for it. The purpose of creating an image for a product or service is to reach a specific type of consumer, while differentiating a certain product from the others in a saturated market, adding value to it. This characteristic makes advertising not only a mode of communication, but also a mode of production – it provides a place where meanings are linked to commodities. As a result, commodity signs and consequently sign values are produced (Goldman: 1987, 693). This process – of how print advertising continually supplies a realm where sign values are created for the American Express cards – is what I explore with this research.

1.3. Advertising and the Individual

A shift in how advertising was presented during the 1980s introduced a more subjective approach to the consumption of goods (Goldman and Papson: 1994, 25). This new approach was characterized by the emphasis on consumers as individuals in charge of their consumption habits and by the promotion of a freer relationship between consumers and brands/products, instead of the emphasis on glamorized images and unrealistic promises. The individual then became the key in the meaning-construction process of advertising messages, allowing each person to come up with their own meaning. This change did not mean that advertisers had no say in how the reader would come up with those meanings, but that a more subtle approach was introduced. This new approach allowed the reader to follow certain cues carefully

⁶ In order to position a product or service and create an image, a conjunct effort between advertising and marketing strategies is required, but for the purposes of the present work I shall focus only on advertising’s effort.

placed in the ad, which lead them to the actual meaning advertisers had in mind for the product. New techniques and narratives were also introduced to challenge the pre-digested meanings and stimulate the search for new ones (Goldman and Papson: 1994, 25). This shift was an answer to the literacy acquired by consumers after years of being exposed to advertising messages and has marked the introduction of sign values to commodities (Goldman: 1987, 694). In a world cluttered with advertising messages, ad practitioners needed to make sure consumers were kept as active agents in this process as a way to hold their attention by placing them as subjects. Advertising then entered the age of *hypersignification*, where semiotics (cf. Chapter 4) became ever more related to both advertising and marketing industries. In this context, all the elements present in ads became filled with significance (ibid.) and essential to the meaning of the message. The concept of sign became the foundation in this new moment. A sign can be described in a few words as something that stands for something else (cf.). Its meaning is culturally and socially shared and only those who partake in the same culture and share the same social background can be expected to come up with the same meaning (Cairns: 2010, 45).

The main allure of advertising is found in how its message is created. According to Beasley and Danesi (2002, 2), contemporary advertising is a mix of art and science, since it not only uses aesthetic techniques in order to influence consumers' perceptions of products and services, but also psychology and statistics to estimate the possible outcomes of the usage of those techniques on consumer behavior. Although advertising speaks in plural it reaches people singularly (Williamson: 1978, 50-51), so that the same message may reach hundreds of thousands of people, but will speak to each of them individually. In order to do so, advertising helps create an image (or personality) for products and services, and persuades the reader to relate to the lifestyle associated with the product. By simply recognizing that the ad speaks to them and identifying themselves with the situation pictured in the ad, consumers stop being spectators and become subjects.

One of the main characteristics of modern advertising is the focus on what consumers supposedly lack (Corrigan: 1997, 67). It is about the individual's future self, after the consumption of the product. According to Williamson (1978, 60), advertising represents the object of desire, which ultimately is our own improved self. With a similar argument, Berger (1972, 126) states that advertising works on people's 'natural appetite for pleasure'. According to the author, while convincing people of

the pleasure pictured in the ad, i.e. the pleasure of being envied by others, it makes them aware of the fact that they are far from enjoying the same pleasure. People then buy the product or service in order to acquire pleasure, which they can never truly achieve. Still, advertising continues to exert influence, because it feeds people's daydreams – it is not about fulfilling promises, but keeping the dream of achieving better versions of ourselves alive. Although from different points in time, those perspectives follow the basic premise that consumers lack certain things, consequently causing them to hold back in social settings. This exploits our need for coherence and meaning within ourselves. The solution offered to this social inadequacy, obviously lies within the consumption of the product, which is filled with the essence that is absent in people (Goldman: 1987, 710). According to Corrigan (1997, 97-98), this advertising tactic is based on psychologist Allport's claim that the image we have of ourselves is primarily constructed upon the thought of what others around us think of us, which can be complemented by Berger's argument (1972) that people's happiness is dependent on the envy of others. In that context, commodities contain our very essences as human beings and purchasing them can be seen as a desperate try of gaining the human qualities we lack.

1.3.1. The Construction of Sign Value

As discussed above, today's advertising focuses on the product's quality as a sign, emphasizing that what it stands for is more important than what it actually is. Marketing efforts are concentrated in the development of a social persona for a product in order to aggregate value to it. This value, which is the product of advertising, is the product's image (Goldman: 1987, 693). This remits us to the two key concepts briefly discussed above: positioning and image creation. The creation of sign value begins at the reader's participation in the interpretation process of the advertising message, i.e. in the meaning-construction process. In order for it to be effective and the right meaning (i.e. the meaning envisioned by advertisers) to be constructed, the product needs to be positioned within the right consumer group. Therefore marketing research is used to better know who its target is as well as their needs and desires, allowing advertisers to better communicate with them. It is important to underline here that although advertising uses common codes and shared

knowledge to speak to its target group, it is still possible that some readers will come up with a different interpretation than intended by advertisers.

In order to fully grasp this process, it is important to understand Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding communication model. Following a Marxist approach, Hall explains the communication process as a circuit: 'a structure produced and sustained through the articulation of linked but distinctive moments – production, circulation, distribution/consumption, reproduction' (Hall in Hall et al. (ed.): 1980, 107). Those moments, although linked, have their own modality, thus following their own specific rules. As pointed out previously in this chapter, in order to successfully create meaning (i.e. to get the receiver to decode a message the way that it was envisioned by the encoder), there has to be symmetry between the codes used by both parts (i.e. the encoder and the receiver). The message is then translated into practice and consciousness (ibid. 109). Although encoding dictates certain parameters in order to guide the decoding process, the latter cannot guarantee the former, because they are two distinct processes that have their own conditions for existence (ibid. 114). Readers decode advertising messages according to their previous knowledge of ads. After a number of years of being exposed to advertising, readers have acquired a significant knowledge about its structure and images (Goldman: 1987, 702). By simply inviting the active participation of the reader in the decoding of the advertising message, it allows an infinite number of meanings to be created. Given this context, advertisers need to make sure to provide the reader with the appropriate referent systems in the advert in order to enhance the chances of leading the readers to their envisioned interpretation.

Another important point is that the interpretation of the ad message, the construction of meanings and the production of sign values are simultaneous processes and therefore cannot be dealt with separately. According to Goldman (ibid. 694), 'ads generate sign values insofar as they constitute a transformational field in which a language of images is turned to accommodate a language of value (i.e. commodities).' That means that advertising provides a place in which the reader constructs the value of a product by transforming the pictures depicted on it into meaningful qualities, which become pivotal in a market saturated with nearly identical products. For example, when a consumer must choose among four different brands of detergent and they all seem to fulfill their primary purpose (i.e. to clean dishes), the other decisive factor that determines the purchase is the sign value (e.g.

Detergent A is seen as ‘the detergent for modern housewives’, *Detergent B* is ‘the detergent for busy mothers on the go’, etc.). Through positioning, the consumer is able to link the product to their lifestyle. According to Goldman (1987, 715), although lifestyle is a relatively new category, appearing only in the 1970s, it has today conquered its place as one of the most used positioning categories. In his article, the author argues that lifestyle has the same appeal to the mass market, as status to the elite market. The term lifestyle characterizes activities such as clothing, interests, work, etc. When used by advertising, lifestyle is then decontextualized and pictured as ‘a set of experiences defined and arranged by consumption of appropriate commodities’ (ibid. 716). According to Goldman and Papson (1996: 10), there are three ways of constructing sign values. One is by simply appropriating the image of a celebrity, a style or something that currently has a high potential market value. The second way is by precisely contrasting the product to what it is not. And the third is by adding self and media referential domains.

All in all, the process of constructing sign values requires the effective participation of the reader, and without it cannot exist. Engaging this participation can be hard to achieve due to the skepticism and lack of credibility usually related to advertising, which is the result of the acquired literacy after years of exposure to advertising messages. In order to avoid those negative postures from the readers’ part (e.g. the flipping through the advert pages, in the case of print advertising) and stimulate their involvement (i.e. the construction of sign value), advertisers and marketers must constantly find new ways of reaching their target consumers and keep their attention on the message being sent.

1.3.2. Intertextuality

The fact that advertising relies on meanings constructed outside its realm, leads us to the concept of intertextuality, which was primarily drawn up by theorist Julia Kristeva who discussed that no artifact is able to make meaning by itself, since meaning is always constructed upon negotiation to other texts that the reader had previous access to⁷ (Burns: 2010, 403). As argued by Goldman and Papson (1996, 37), in order to fully understand advertising messages, the reader must recognize its allusions to other

⁷ This discussion about meaning being constructed through mediation of other texts remits to Saussure’s semiotic theory, which will be discussed in Chapter 3.

texts from which they derive meaning. Those texts work as ‘a hook to anchor the association of the commodity with the consumer’s memories’ (ibid. 38). In other words, advertising texts appropriate other cultural texts (e.g. movies, songs, other adverts, etc.) and use them as references, transforming those texts into signifiers in order to increase the symbolic exchange value of a given product. According to Goldman (1987, 693), the reason why readers are able to successfully decode an advert’s meaning is because it uses shared meanings and cultural codes and because there are rules that help readers decode those messages, which are drawn from ads the reader had previous access to.

There are different levels of intertextuality and the more intricate they are, the more reflexivity it requires from the reader. When an advert features a celebrity picture juxtaposed with a product, it requires no reflexivity because the transference process is simple. What is meant by the juxtaposition is that the celebrity’s referent system (i.e. what it signifies, the value they have as celebrities) is transferred to the product. Williamson (1978, 27) explains it as follows: Celebrity A \neq Celebrity B, thus the product advertised by Celebrity A is different from the one advertised by Celebrity B. Over time, the concept of intertextuality has been refined to better suit the literacy acquired by consumers after excessively being exposed to advertising texts. Thus advertising began borrowing its meanings from more complex referent systems, requiring deeper levels of reflexivity and knowledge of different media genres and codes. By using a deeper level of reflexivity, advertising tries to legitimize itself through the reader’s everyday life (ibid. 48). A good example of a more complex type of intertextuality is the use of music in TV spots (ibid.). The use of music in spots has a different purpose from the use of jingles – because while the latter is made with the product in mind and aims at product recall, the former aims at transferring its meaning, which already exists in another realm from the product. Thus the music played in ads gives the product a sense of personality. This argument is complemented by Williamson (1978), who states that through the appropriation of other cultural texts advertising not only borrows, but also empties the meaning from those texts, thus reducing entire referent systems to signifiers. As a consequence, memory also loses itself in this never-ending process of rewritten meanings, instead of grounding itself in history and society.

It is interesting to notice how intertextuality also works the other way around. Since its beginning, advertising has changed not only our relationship with

commodities and services, but also our relationship with each other. This brings us back to the discussion in the beginning of this chapter of how advertising has changed communication between people. Today, not only does advertising borrow meanings from people's everyday lives, but people also borrow meanings from advertising. The coining of phrases such as '*Don't leave home without it.*' (American Express® card) and '*Wazzzzup?*' (Budweiser® beer) are good examples of advertising texts that became references in people's everyday lives. Although some people might not even know that those expressions were appropriated from advertising campaigns, they still use them in colloquial social contexts.

1.3.3. Appealing to the Upper-Class

In order to understand the different mechanisms and techniques used in the print ad-campaigns, it is essential to have a deeper knowledge of the main targets of those messages. As previously stated, the American Express card is positioned as the card of the rich and affluent. However, for the purpose of this research, those concepts go beyond monetary power to also encompass standards of the cultural sphere, such as lifestyle and consumption patterns. These criteria are generally used to differentiate social groups and are maintained because people are prone to socialize among their peers, thus perpetuating these habits (Holt: 1998, 2). Because the advances in technology have enabled access of goods to a wide range of people as well as their mass-production, the symbolic power of goods as status markers have been emptied. As a way to be set apart and express their social status, the rich and affluent have not only developed distinct consumption patterns, but also a distinct relationship to consumption, in which the focus shifts from luxury and ostentation to the embodied form (i.e. focus on consumption practices themselves and not the cultural contents to which they are applied to) and aesthetic styles that are socially scarce and better fit their sensibilities (ibid. 4-6). The focus is then moved from economic displays to cultural displays (Leiss et al.: 2005, 86), which has forced advertisers to refine the narrative of luxury to better communicate with this segment. This argument leads to the theory of *Cultural Capital*, drawn by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu during the 1960s. Cultural capital is a theoretical field that encompasses tastes and cultural

knowledge as a measurement to distinguish social classes. In Bourdieu's own words (Bourdieu: 1984, xxix),

[t]aste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make, between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar, in which their position in the objective classifications is expressed or betrayed.

For those with high cultural capital, the monetary value of a good is not seen as a decisive factor in its consumption. According to Leiss et al. (2005, 530), in order to appeal to this specific stratum, advertisers should emphasize the cultural aspects of products over the economic, its distinctiveness over rarity, and social scarcity over financial scarcity. As illustrated by the research conducted by Holt (1998), where he examined the applicability of Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital in the contemporary United States, taste for this social group is about self-expression and construction of subjectivity, cosmopolitanism and individuality, making the act of consumption about enabling those experiences. They seek to achieve subjectivity through authenticity, (i.e. by immersing themselves in a different culture or social milieu) and connoisseurship (i.e. by gathering a deeper knowledge and understanding of certain product categories, thus reconfiguring mass cultural objects), as opposed to collectivism and systematic consumption patterns that are typical of those with low cultural capital (ibid. 14-15). In a few words, the tastes and consumer patterns of those with high cultural capital can be summarized as follows (ibid. 19): focus on formal aesthetics and critical approach to goods, idealism (i.e. focus on the experience as opposed to materialism), cosmopolitan, search for ways to express individuality and leisure as self-actualization experiences.

Very similar findings to those in Holt's research were made on the case study conducted by Leiss et al. (2005, 522-561). In it, 4000 print advertising pieces were collected from the high-profile magazine *Vanity Fair* from 1990 to 2002, with the purpose of analyzing advertising strategies to reach out to the cultural elite (*Culturati*). According to the case study, it was quite clear that the focus of advertising had changed from abundance to uniqueness and cultural superiority. Products were put in the background as the readers' abilities to distinguish products became the focal point (ibid. 533): '(...) Champagne is 'for people who know', and jewelry is recognized by those with 'instinct''. The transformation promised by

advertising upon the consumption of a product was redirected to the consumers' cultural capital instead – it is up to it to transform mass-produced products into rare ones. To the authors (ibid. 560), the *culturati* assure their position as cultural elite due to their skillfulness to articulate opinions about not only the product, but also its designer and style (i.e. connoisseurship). This is due to their fear of mass-production, which mobilizes them to relate the product to either a craftsperson or an artist.

A fairly common way in which advertising tries to reach the upper-class is by referring to works of art. According to Berger (1972, 129), there are two reasons why works of art are 'quoted' by advertising: (1) it is a sign of affluence and (2) it is a part of the *mise en scène* of the rich and beautiful. Art lends cultural authority to the advertising message and its purchase is seen as both financial and cultural investments. Hence, advertising exploits art as a social marker of the privileged few to position products and services to this specific group, helping to perpetuate their cultural supremacy in our contemporary Western consumer society. This fact leads us to the next discussion tackled in this chapter – the role of advertising in sustaining ideology.

1.4. Advertising and Ideology

The essence of ideology is the continuous reproduction of ideas within a society 'which are denied a historical beginning or end, and which are used or referred to 'because' they 'already' exist in society, and continue to exist in society 'because' they are used and referred to', working as a timeless vicious cycle within it (Williamson: 1978, 99). Since their beginning, advertising messages have always been loaded with social values, which have helped perpetrate the consumeristic complex as the center of our modern capitalistic society (Wernick: 1983, 16). In its earlier period, advertising messages helped strengthen societal practices and reinforced existing roles (e.g. male/female, middle/upper-class, etc.). In a second moment, around 1930-60 (Leiss: 1983, 10), in order to keep up with the exponential growth in production and stimulate consumption, advertising did not only let consumers know about the existence of new products on the market, but incited radical changes within household habits, spending patterns, and family values. Advertising then worked as a bridge in order to link the older, traditional world that

was vanishing, and the new consumer age, as well as humanized corporations in the new sites of modernity (Leiss et al.: 2005, 72-74). In more recent times, society has seen the rise of lifestyle promotions as well as changes in the existing societal roles. This way, advertising went back to reflecting the changes in both societal and economic spheres and transmitting behavioral cues associated with products and personal styles (ibid. 74).

A recurring topic of discussion is what Goldman (1987, 717) calls '*pseudo-individuality*', in which the promise of individualization is sold by advertising through the consumption of commodities, leading it to their standardization. The emphasis and excessive use of personal pronouns such as 'you', 'mine', 'yours', 'you' and 'me' contribute to the illusion of individuality upon the consumption of a given product, by blurring the traces of the pronouns referent systems. However, as pointed out by the author (ibid. 718), the same type of pseudo-individuality is also presented in ads where models supposedly represent improved versions of ourselves, after the consumption of the advertised product. Following advertising's premise, regardless of one's individual characteristics, the outcome of the commodity consumption is always the same, hence denying them the same individuality that is being sold. By promising the reader the achievement of uniqueness embodied in a standardized product, advertising, through the production and consumption of commodity signs, empties him or her of the very qualities that make them unique (i.e. their personal characteristics). Another recurring topic and object of heated discussions (Berger 1972; Williamson 1978; Kilbourne 1999) is the part played by advertising in perpetrating gender roles in our society, especially its impact on women's identity construction and values. The method used by advertising to get consumers to buy a product is to make them dissatisfied with their current life. However, dissatisfaction should not make them critical of society, but of themselves (Berger: 1972, 136).

With that in mind, consumption becomes a way in which satisfaction is sought to be achieved. However, this satisfaction is never completely fulfilled, since advertising messages keep bombarding consumers with new wants and appealing to their insecurities and longing for coherence (Williamson: 1978, 60). Satisfaction, then, is offered by advertising through the consumption of different products, but never truly achieved. It is in keeping the desire for consumption alive that lies the secret of our western capitalist society. In the next chapter, I will go through how the introduction of credit and consequently credit cards, enabled consumption and

consequently the capitalist system to succeed in our contemporary Western society as well as how advertising was able to empty the American Express cards of their purpose as credit tools and re-sell them as coveted commodities.

Chapter 2

From Credit to American Express Cards

After outlining the greater concepts concerning advertising in the previous chapter, I will here briefly trace the evolution of credit, from its inception and effects on both social and economic relations, up to the introduction of the first American Express cards on the market. As I seek to achieve a deeper understanding of the signs and meanings behind the American Express cards print ad campaigns in order to analyze their role in the creation of the cards' sign value, it is essential a greater understanding of the product so one is able to clearly see the role played by advertising in this process.

Here I also trace the chronology of the print ad campaigns up to date (2012), with the purpose of illustrating their development over time and how the company has tried to meet new consumer needs. It is important to stress that this is not the textual analysis, as the latter will be performed in Chapter 4.

2.1. Selling Credit

Credit became an important instrument in the relations among nations, allowing less prosperous countries to borrow money from those already industrialized, and to purchase products of industry they could not produce themselves. Beyond merely keeping their economies working and production going, the industrialized countries also profited from the interest accumulated on the credit. This type of capital gained a new aura of fairness, as opposed to that of sin, because it allowed the inception of those countries into modernity (Hobsbawm: 1996, 83). This business logic was transferred early on to both business and individual relations. To industries, credit became an essential instrument for the upkeep of their activities, allowing the individual to partake in the consumption game, thus transforming him into a consumer, as illustrated by Baudrillard (1998, 81) as follows:

[Credit] is an exemplary idea because, in the guise of gratification, ease of access to affluence and hedonist mentality ‘freed from the old taboos of saving, etc.’, [it] is in fact a systematic socio-economic training in enforced saving and economic calculation for generations of consumers who would otherwise, in a life of subsistence, have escaped demand planning and would not have been exploitable as consumption power.

As seen in the passage above, the individual, now with access to credit, was allowed the benefits of modernity, which as explained above, was only achieved through the introduction of credit. It is in this context that credit gains a positive image. Whilst granting credit is still a risk for the creditor, this risk is minimized by translation into high interest rates. These high interest rates also protect creditors against losses from nonpayment, essential to their continued operation because their credit is not levied against the customer’s physical property, as with mortgages or car loans.

Since greater risks mean higher interest rates, the latter become harmful elements in the economics game and stop being fair to credit users who wisely pay off their debts within the due date. The search for effective warranties to granted credit is what spurred development and prosperity in this area of the 20th century. A good example is the development of the credit card. The credit card is one of the most widely used credit tools, because it gives access to immediate pre-approved credit – and whilst owing its existence to sweeping technological changes – credit also helped bring these new technologies about. These changes broadened the possibilities for its use, and went through different stages of evolution:

The use of coins and bills is fast being substituted by the use of small plastic cards. Financial institutions, banks and a growing number of commercial stores offer their clients cards that can be used in the purchase of a large number of goods and services (...). The cards are not like real money: they simply register the consumer’s intention to pay (...). It is, however, an immediate gateway to credit. Credit cards were introduced in the United States in the 1920’s, being offered by gas stations, hotels and firms to their most loyal customers. They could fill their car tanks with gas or stay at a hotel without using money or cheques.’ (Banco Central do Brasil)⁸

In a capitalist society, where most people do not own the means of production, this specific credit tool became very useful, allowing people to chronologically adjust

⁸ My translation. Text available in Portuguese at <http://www.bc.gov.br/?HISTCARTAO> [last accessed on September 25th 2012]

the down payments to their paydays. All things considered, and despite economic crises in 1929 and 2007, the use of credit instruments, with particular emphasis on the credit card, has shown to be helpful in the functioning of economic systems (Bernthal: 2005, 130), which is the central role of the credit card in the economy. In the 1950's the credit card stopped being the materialization of a trust relationship between a business and its clients, and was taken over by business conglomerates, giving access to a much larger network of customers and establishments. The following paragraph draws up the context when a 'multi-purpose' card was introduced in the middle of the 20th century:

In 1950, the Diners Club created the first 'modern' credit card. It was accepted in 27 restaurants in the United States and was used by important businessmen as a practical way to pay for their travelling, working and leisure expenses. (ibid.)

From that moment on it was up to the financial institutions to select prospective clients who were able to pay back their debts, and thus be worthy of possessing credit. For the merchants, the biggest advantage was in being able to reach a larger clientele without the concern for each individual client's financial situation at any given time. For clients, on the other hand, the advantages were easy access to credit and a greater range of establishments without the need for loyalism. For the financial institutions, who made the entire process possible and who derived the most benefit, the advantage was in financing the transactions, charging both consumers and merchants a fee. In 1955, Diners started using plastic in the fabrication of their credit cards, and in 1958 the American Express company introduced its first credit card (Banco Central do Brasil)⁹. In 1969, the company dropped the color purple from its credit cards, switching to the iconic green that most of us are familiar with today¹⁰. The product's name lost the 'credit', becoming only the *American Express Card*, but the picture of the Roman centurion, who according to the company stands for security and reliability, was kept. Advertising was then used to promote the American Express Card with the slogan '*The New Money*' and for the first time the company referred to its customers as *cardmembers* (ibid.).

⁹ My translation. Text available in Portuguese at <http://www.bc.gov.br/?HISTCARTAO> [last accessed on September 25th 2012]

¹⁰ Available at <http://home3.americanexpress.com/corp/os/history.asp?> [last accessed on November 3rd 2010]

As time went by, credit cards began a process of specialization, and expansion throughout the world in parallel to the process of globalization seen in the 20th century. Today, properly expanded and consolidated, it represents a big part of international commerce. Its main advantage over cash is in allowing consumers to purchase goods and services without possessing money at time of the transaction, making consumption markers immediately available to a different social stratum that otherwise would not have access (Bernthal: 2005, 130). Credit cards, if properly used, can be efficient support instruments for the satisfaction of the needs of those who carry them, as well as making participation in the consumer culture more democratic. As pointed out by Leiss et al. (2005, 77), the use of credit card has transformed personal debt from failure to an everyday-life necessity.

Competition is fierce in the credit business, with advertising campaigns mostly aiming at its targets aspirations and desires. It is thus an industry where what is marketed is ‘what you want to be, rather than what you are’, as stated by John L. Morton, research director at the Total Research Corporation (The NY Times, April 9th 1990 [online])¹¹. We can clearly see that argument applied in the following interview conducted by Bernthal et al. for a study about credit cards and lifestyle management (Bernthal et al.: 2005, 136):

Interviewer: Why did you use American Express for dinner and Visa for personal things?

Interviewee (Chen): Somehow they promote a good image. When I’m working at advertising and sales, I need to promote myself personally as a type of successful person. The American Express image helped me to do so. Somehow if I go to pay my bill by [sic] American Express card my friends and clients will know that I am doing a successful job – there will be more respect.

The paragraph above adds another important point to the discussion. It shows that the appeal of having a credit card does not only rely on its instrumentality as an easy access to credit and the consequent social and consumption markers one is allowed to purchase with it, but that the possession of a specific brand of credit card, an American Express card, is a social marker and a symbol by itself¹². Carrying an

¹¹ Available at <http://www.nytimes.com/1990/04/09/business/mastercard-s-shift-from-glamour.html> [last accessed on August 3rd 2011]

¹² In this case, the credit card as an object becomes the sign of certain tastes and lifestyle, and it is that process – the transformation of the American Express cards into signs of affluence and status – that is the objective of the present research.

American Express card has a different social meaning than carrying a Visa or a MasterCard, for example – it embodies certain tastes and preferences that are associated with the specific lifestyle of the rich and successful (ibid.). Today however, with other companies also targeting affluent¹³ and upscale consumers, one may argue that the primary differentiator among issuers seems to be their reward programs (Goldman and Papson: 1996, 42). American Express, which has for a long time been synonymous with ‘corporate prestige and status’, started directly competing against its main rival, Visa¹⁴, which has grown to be associated with broad acceptance and ‘the good life’ (NY Times, October 22nd 1997 [online]). This reinforces the idea that although prestige today may not be as important as it once was, it still has an appeal to specific segments in the population.

In the following pages, I introduce the chronology of the American Express cards’ print ad-campaigns in order to illustrate its evolution and how it adapted itself to the new market demands.

2.2. The American Express Cards’ Print Ad-Campaigns

The advertising agency Ogilvy & Mather has been in charge of The Cards’ campaigns since 1962, with only a small pause in 1991. The agency is responsible for the glamorous and stylized ads with the marvelous lines such as *‘Don’t Leave Home Without It’* and *‘Membership Has Its Privileges’*. According to Advertising Age magazine (June 25th 2006, online), in 2006 the company was estimated to spend more than \$602 million annually on promoting all its products, but the focus of this research is on the company’s charge cards. Listed below, in chronological order, are the global campaigns for the product with the sole purpose of illustrating the evolution in how the company has been portraying their cards – from the very first ad campaign in 1974 up to today (2012). Since an in-depth analysis of all six campaigns would be too much for an MA thesis, I have selected a sample of three (cf. chapter 3) as the objects of my analysis in Chapter 4.

¹³ According to The NY Times (May 2005, last accessed on July 29th 2010), the affluent customers tend to earn over \$100,000 annually and charge seven or eight times the annual \$3,400 of the average customer.

¹⁴ Visa is the largest credit card operator in the US, accounting for half of the general-purpose payment cards (Evans and Schmalensee: 2005, 19)

2.2.1. 1974 – 1987: ‘Do You Know Me?’

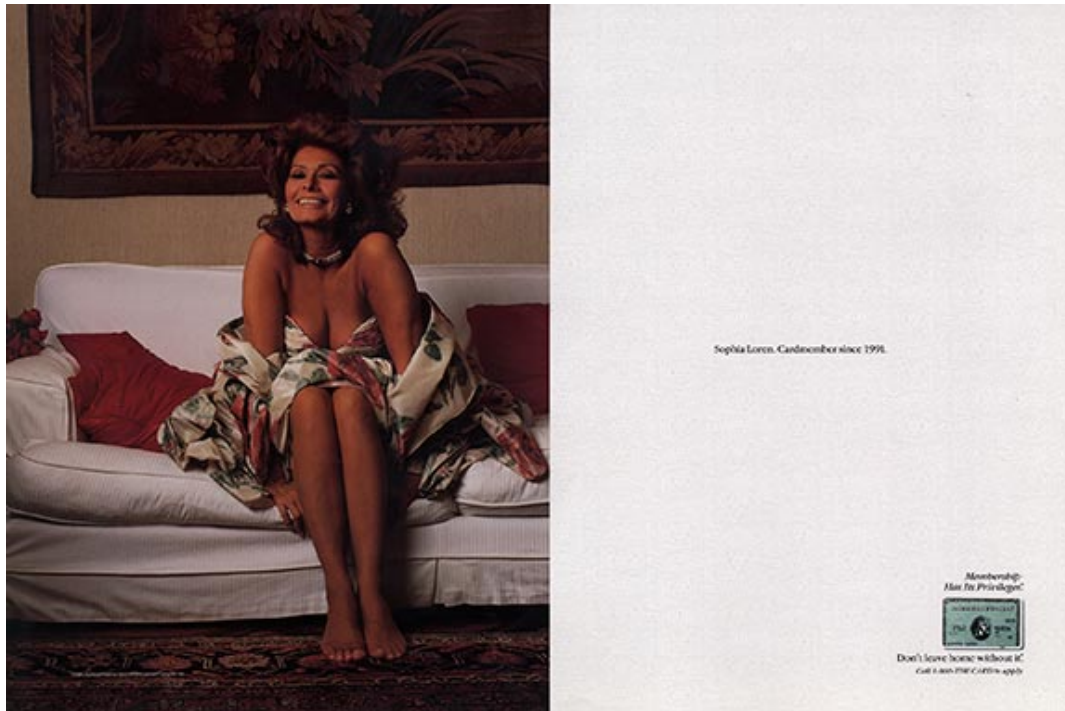
That was the question posed by the then new American Express advertising campaign in order to show its target audience that carrying an American Express card was the ticket to recognition and respect. This campaign was composed by TV commercials, and the first ad featured 1964 Vice Presidential candidate William Miller. Subsequent ads featured football player Pelé, Italian tenor Luciano Pavarotti, runner Jesse Owens, ski racer Jean Claude Killy, racing driver Sir Jackie Stewart, explorer Sir Edmund Hillary and fashion designer Paloma Picasso – famous people in their respective careers, but whose faces were not very well-known by the general public.

Around the same time, in 1975, the company launched the complementary campaign ‘*Don’t Leave Home Without It.*’ (Evans and Shmalensee: 2005, 191), which became part of the American lexicon¹⁵, all the while reinforcing the importance of the card for charging purchases all over the world, and the American Express cards as the ultimate possession for successful people. The campaign became one of the company’s most memorable, running in 18 countries for 10 years, and is number 17 on the *Top 100 Ad-Campaigns* by Advertising Age Magazine (AdAge.com)¹⁶.

2.2.2. 1987 – 1996: ‘Membership Has Its Privileges.’

¹⁵ This iconic tag line was first created for the company’s traveler’s cheques by David Ogilvy himself and later expanded to include charge cards. (Selorelse.ogilvy.com, available at <http://selorelse.ogilvy.com/selling-never-goes-out-of-style> [last accessed on May 16th 2011])

¹⁶ Available at <http://adage.com/century/campaigns.html> [last accessed on March 9th 2011]



(Image: Sardineacademy.com)

Figure 2.1: Italian actress Sophia Loren in one of the ‘*Membership Has Its Privileges*’ campaign ads. The copy reads ‘Sophia Loren. Cardmember since 1994.’

The campaign ‘*Membership Has Its Privileges.*’ aimed at signing up new cardmembers and was launched in March 1987 with the complimentary ‘*Portraits*’, a print campaign, featuring well-known cardmembers profiled in photographs by the renowned photographer Annie Leibovitz, for which she won the *Clio Award* in 1987 and *Campaign of the Decade* from Advertising Age Magazine in 1990¹⁷. ‘*Portraits*’ included 42 charter cardmembers, such as actress Helen Hayes, comedian Alan King, and golf player Robert Trent Jones and focused on them using their cards. Both campaigns reinforced service and the benefits of being affiliated with a world-class brand in such an exclusive club. This campaign had a brief pause in November 1991, when the company switched their charge/credit cards ad account to the advertising agency Chiat/Day/Mojo and the new campaign called ‘*The Card. The American Express Card.*’ was introduced. In October 1992, Ogilvy & Mather regained the account and continued with ‘*Membership Has Its Privileges.*’ (The NY Times [online], November 8th 1991)

¹⁷ Available at <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/episodes/annie-leibovitz/career-timeline/17/> [last accessed on July 31st 2011]

2.2.3. 1996 – 2004: ‘Do More.’



(Image: Levelbrand.com)

Figure 2.2: This ‘Do More.’ campaign ad¹⁸ shows an intimate moment between a mother and her children.

‘Do More.’ marked a new phase in the creative core of the company, as it was the first attempt to reposition the American Express brand. Long being associated with celebrities and their glamorous lives, and perceived as the card of the wealthy, it was the first time that an American Express ad-campaign aimed at targets with different

¹⁸ The body copy reads: “It’s not how many futures are promised, but how many are delivered. Despite all the lip service that gets paid to long-term investing. It’s hard to find clients who take the same approach when it comes to their planner. In the world of personal finance, clients switch planners (and planners switch companies) all the time. Yet at American Express we retain 95% of our clients and 96% of our top-producing advisors each year. The reason is simple: We empower our financial advisors with an impressive array of training, products and support. That way, they can help achieve brighter futures for our clients and themselves. 1-800-660-6932.”

demographics and income, hoping to broaden their consumer base and introduce their new cards¹⁹ (Evans and Schmalensee: 2005, 198).

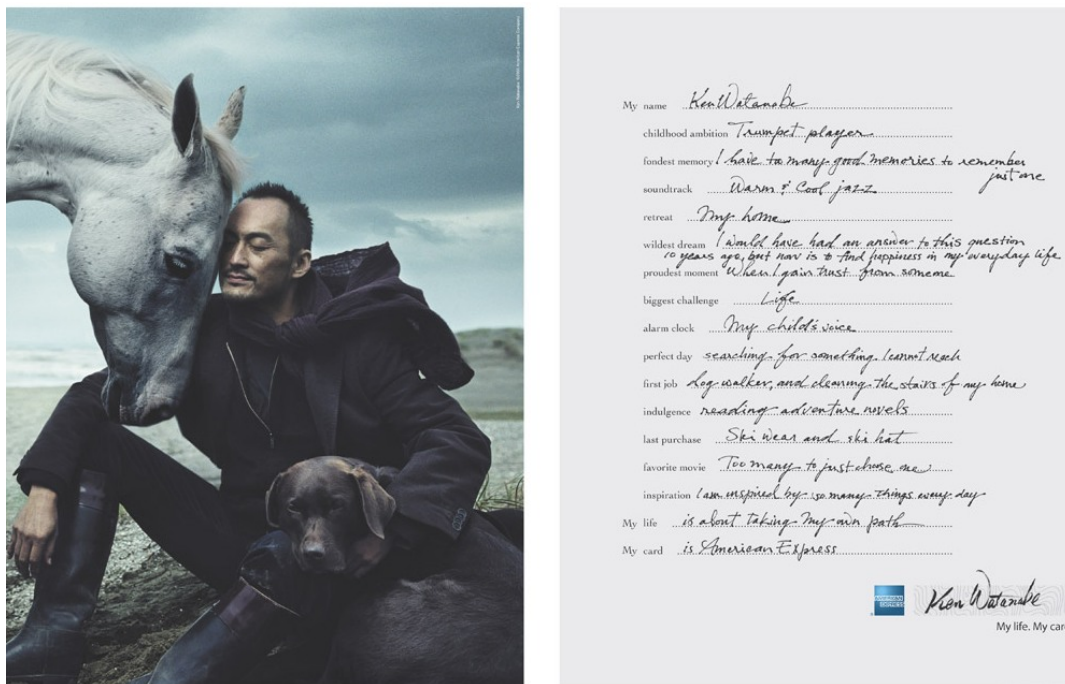
Using the popularity of comedian Jerry Seinfeld and then 21-year-old golf player Tiger Woods, the company wished to show its relevance to a more diverse group of consumers and not just their traditional upscale ones²⁰. The main focus was in the usefulness of the card and what it could offer beyond credit and not just the elitism associated with it. This strategy was an answer to the changes in the credit card industry, where the American Express card was perceived more as a statement than a credit card. Although its high profile cardmembers would use the card to make extravagant purchases, they would turn to competitor cards for daily expenditures, such as gas and groceries. It was a difficult task to expand its appeal to new customers while keeping the interest of current customers. However, the segmented campaign was able to raise the number of cardholders from 19.6 million in 1993 to 25.2 million in 2002 (ibid. 197).

Also following a less elitist approach, in 2001 the company launched a complementary campaign in the US called '*Make Life Rewarding.*', which illustrated different ways the American Express card could make life easier and more pleasurable. (ibid.)

2.2.4. 2004 - 2007: 'My Life. My Card.'

¹⁹ According to Evans and Schmalensee (2002, 196), in 1996 the company had added to their portfolio credit cards, cobranded cards and special cards for students and senior citizens.

²⁰ Available at <http://marketing-case-studies.blogspot.no/search/label/American%20Express> [last accessed on May 16th 2011]



(Image: Porhomme.com)

Figure 2.3: This 'My Life. My Card.' ad²¹ features Japanese award-winning actor Ken Watanabe.

This campaign was launched to promote the company's brand in general and not a specific card. In its first phase, the TV spots featured celebrities such as comedian and TV hostess Ellen DeGeneres, Director Wes Anderson and Academy Award-winning actor Robert De Niro, using their credit cards in their daily lives, complete with their signature. The aim was to create an emotional and practical connection between the brand and consumers. The ads are presented as short films that give insight into the different lives these people live. Both acclaimed movie director Martin Scorsese and photographer Annie Leibovitz creatively contributed to the campaign's TV spots and print ads, respectively (Newswire.ca)²². According to Stuart Elliot, NY Times advertising columnist, 'My Life. My Card.' followed the trend of brand personalization and customization, allowing the consumer to have it their own way, conveying to them a sense of ownership (The NY Times [online],

²¹ The body copy reads: "My name: Ken Watanabe / childhood ambition: trumpet player / fondest memory: I have too many good memories to remember just one / soundtrack: warm & cool jazz / retreat: my home / wildest dream: I would have had an answer to this question 10 years ago, but now is to find happiness in my everyday life / biggest challenge: life / alarm clock: my child's voice / perfect day: searching for something I cannot reach / first job: dog walker and cleaning the stairs of my home / indulgence: reading adventure novels / last purchase: ski wear and ski hat / favorite movie: too many to just choose one / inspiration: I am inspired by so many things every day / My life: is about taking my own path / My card: is American Express"

²² Available at <http://www.newswire.ca/en/releases/mmnr/amex/> [last accessed on July 1st 2011]

May 2nd 2006). The print ads are each composed by a celebrity picture and its signature on a white strip, which emulates the one found on the back of credit cards.

Later on, different print ads were introduced, which according to Kate Wilentz, a former employee of Ogilvy & Mather NY who worked on the campaign²³, were an answer to the needs of the company to convey a stronger connection between celebrities and the credit cards, while still using the work of Leibovitz. The new print ads were also double-page and the layout was similar to the one seen in *'Membership Has its Privileges'* (1987-1996), but instead of the phrase *'Cardmember since (...)'*, the right page contains a questionnaire filled out by the celebrity featured on the left page and their signature on the bottom, in the same way as in the previous ads.

Among the celebrities featured on the ads are: Indian-American director M. T. Shyamalan, golf player Tiger Woods, Oscar-winning actress Kate Winslet and American big-wave surfer Laird Hamilton. According to Beth Horowitz (Newswire.ca)²⁴, President and CEO of Amex Bank of Canada, '[by] utilizing such a diverse line-up of interesting personalities that appeal to a variety of consumer segments, [the company is] able to extend [its] brand to a broader group of aspiring and existing customers'. In an article published by the NY Times, the company's Chief Marketing Officer in New York, John Hayes, said that the campaign 'has done a great job redefining the notion of membership' and has also reminded the consumers that 'American Express is a company, not just about transactions, but about relationships.' (The NY Times [online], April 6th 2007)

2.2.5. 2007 - 2009: 'Are You a Cardmember?'

In the campaign this question is answered with examples of what the company believes are the benefits of its charge cards and it is a specific product-focused task, in contrary to the previous campaign. According to John Hayes²⁵,

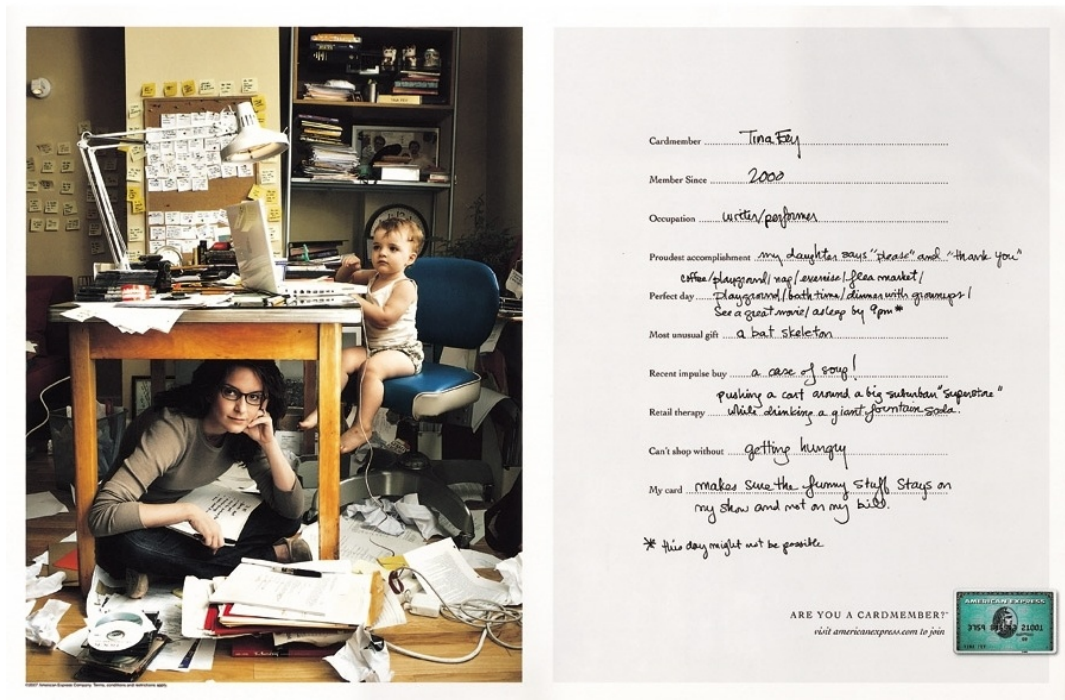
'the (...) campaign continues the tradition of defining the value of belonging to the American Express community by showcasing some of [the] most exceptional cardmembers and the ways in which membership works for them.

²³ Available at <http://katewilentz.com/amex1.html> [last accessed on April 2nd 2011].

²⁴ Available at <http://www.newswire.ca/en/releases/mmnr/amex/> [last accessed on July 1st 2011]

²⁵ Available at <http://www.adweek.com/news/advertising/ogilvy-changes-amex-tagline-88553> [last accessed on June 29th 2011].

But the challenge we put forward in [this] campaign, not only reaffirms for existing members why they belong, it calls to non-members to consider becoming a cardmember.’



(Image: Abouttheimage.com)

Figure 2.4: Actress and comedian Tina Fey and her daughter Alice. This ‘Are You a Cardmember?’ ad²⁶ plays with the mother and daughter roles and shows Fey working under her office table, while her daughter takes over her working chair.

The strategy was to convince consumers that there are important advantages to carrying the company’s charge cards, even if it means paying fees competing credit cards do not have, and calls them to action. According to Diego Scotti, global head of marketing at American Express, this campaign aims to go into more depth about what the cardmembers can get out of the membership, since the rewards program is seen as the primary differentiator between issuers in the saturated market of credit cards (The NY Times [online], April 6th 2007).

Some of the campaign’s print ads will continue featuring famous cardmembers with the one-page questionnaires, just like in the previous campaign, but other ads will consist of coming up with solutions to difficult problems and it

²⁶The copy reads: “Cardmember: Tina Fey / Member Since: 2000 / Occupation: Writer/Performer / Proudest accomplishment: My daughter says ‘please’ and ‘thank you’ / Perfect day: Coffee/playground/nap/exercise/flea market/playground/bath time/dinner with grownups/see a great movie/ asleep by 9 pm* / Most unusual gift: a bat skeleton / Recent impulse buy: a case of soup! / Retail therapy: Pushing a cart around a big suburban ‘superstore’ while drinking a giant fountain soda / Can’t shop without: getting hungry / My card: makes sure the funny stuff stays on my show and not on my bill. *this day might not be possible.”

always begins with the words ‘*Are you (...)*’. Andrew McCains (AdAge.com)²⁷ describes one of the ads as asking the following questions to the reader: ‘Are you arriving in Dallas to find your bags are in Uzbekistan? *Or*, ‘Are you glad you have complimentary baggage insurance?’. In another it gets more specific and asks ‘Are you staying in a room the size of most bathrooms? *Or*, Are you a cardmember?’.

2.2.6. 2009 – 2012: ‘Realise the Potential.’

This campaign marks a crucial change in *The Cards*’ advertising history, not only for the fact that it does not feature celebrities, but by being deeply influenced by digitalization and the widespread societal adoption of digital technologies. In the first phase of this animated campaign, the ads promote the advantages and privileges of being a cardmember by defying them to realize the potential of carrying an American Express card. According to Ogilvy & Mather UK²⁸, the campaign is aimed at ‘a generation of affluent consumers looking to live rounded, enriched lives’ and features examples of how American Express can help their cardmembers in diverse situations and focuses on specific benefits and services offered by the company. According to Corrina Davison, the company’s Vice-President of Brand, Loyalty and Rewards (Theinspirationroom.com)²⁹, nowadays consumers are looking for added value from the products and services they buy and ‘*Realise the Potential.*’ highlights the advantages of having an American Express card. While expressing the services offered by American Express, the campaign reassures the importance of investing in the brand during challenging times. Still according to Davison, in difficult times, consumers tend not to make big, ‘high status’ purchases and their interests are turned towards life experiences, such as travel, leisure and spending time with family and friends.

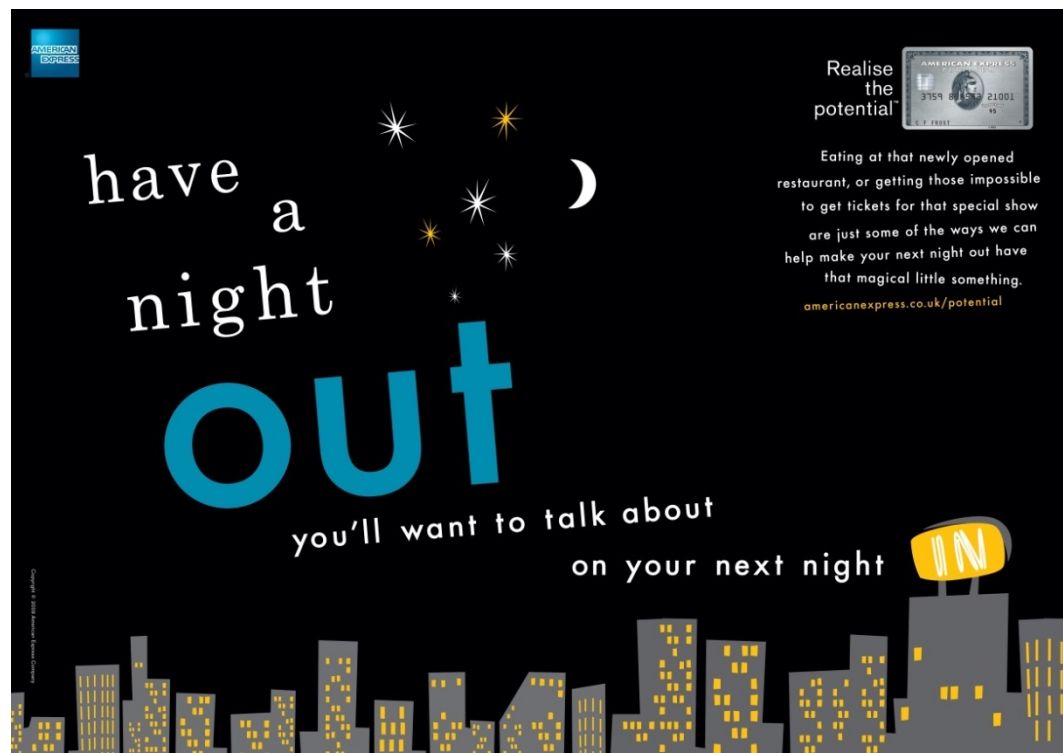
In the second phase, the campaign takes a turn and invites consumers ‘to re-appraise the brand by helping them realize the untapped potential in themselves, the

²⁷Available at <http://www.adweek.com/news/advertising/ogilvy-changes-amex-tagline-88553> [last accessed on June 29th 2011].

²⁸Available at <http://www.ogilvy.co.uk/ogilvy-advertising/2009/10/19/american-express-realise-the-potential-campaign-the-press-ads-start-here/> [last accessed on August 11th 2010]

²⁹Available at <http://theinspirationroom.com/daily/2009/American-express-realise-the-potential/> [last accessed on May 16th 2011]

world around them and in the card.’ (Ogilvy.co.uk)³⁰ The aim is to inspire customers to get more out of their own lives.



(Image: Ogilvy.co.uk)

Figure 2.5: This ‘Realise the Potential.’ ad illustrates a city alive at night and shows how the American Express card can help its cardmembers have an unforgettable night out. It reads: “Have a night out you’ll want to talk about on your next night. Eating at that newly opened restaurant, or getting those impossible to get tickets for that special show are just some of the ways we can help make your next night out have that magical little something.”

³⁰ Available at <http://www.ogilvy.co.uk/blog/bold-new-mould-breaking-blue-dot-campaign-for-amex-breaks-tonight/> [last accessed on March 8th 2011]

Chapter 3

Methodology

& Theoretical Framework

After introducing the objects of research and outlining its historical and socio-economic contexts in Chapter 2, I will here present how the analysis is structured. This chapter aims not only at explaining the decisions concerning methods and theories applied to my analysis, but also to dissect them in detail. With the following pages, I aim to hopefully lead into a greater insight into how analysis was conducted.

3.1. Analyzing the Print Ad Campaigns: Methods

The reason I have chosen to focus only on printed ad campaigns was mainly the fact that, as pointed out by Vestergaard and Schröder (1985: 10), print adverts are easier to gather and study as opposed to TV commercials, since the latter make use of different combinations of sounds and images, making them difficult to reproduce in print, while printed adverts are simple to reproduce in their totality. However, since there are no differences between their basic persuasive methods, there are no big disadvantages in focusing on print ads. Also, if I were to use TV commercials in my research, I would need additional methods, making this research too extensive for an MA thesis. Nevertheless, I have chosen to include the interactive online advert in the analysis of the campaign '*Realise the Potential.*' (2009 – 2012), due to it being a completely new approach used by the company that was made able by the recent widespread adoption of the Internet as medium and also do to it enabling the reader to create their very own personalized print ad, so the same tools will be used in its analysis.

Nevertheless, it is interesting to point out that print ads are more complex sign systems than TV or digital spots in that they require a more active participation from the reader (as discussed in Chapter 1, print stimulates a linear-rational way of

thinking), making them more compelling to analyze. Due to its concise space, every single element present on the ad ought to be thoroughly thought of and meaningful in order to successfully create meaning. Due to lower costs of production and circulation of print ads and the fact that print is a highly segmented medium, it makes it much easier not only to produce a wider variety of ads, which then can be shaped to communicate specifically with special target groups (e.g. sports fans, travelers, businessmen, etc), but it also makes it easier to reach them (Leiss et al.: 2005, 104).

3.1.1. Gathering the Material

My initial idea for the project was to contact the American Express Company and kindly ask for their help in order to get a hold of all the ad campaigns and maybe some of the history to go along with it. After quite a few frustrated phone calls and unanswered e-mails, both to American Express and the ad agency Ogilvy & Mather, and finding out that there was nothing that the helpful staff at our University library could do, I finally came to the conclusion that I would have to find the advertising pieces myself. I started doing an ethereal search on the Internet to gather the material I needed. Before even considering using them, I made sure that they all came from reliable and reputable websites, so that I would not have to worry about their authenticity.

Due to my lack of resources, I was not able to find out in which magazines and newspapers the campaigns were printed and that is the reason why I do not include this data in my analysis, although I am fully aware of the importance of such information. Due to the fact of print media being highly segmented, the knowledge of where each advertising piece was published (i.e. which newspaper(s) and/or magazine(s)) would surely provide us a better overview of the recipients of the message, which consequently would enlighten the understanding of the codes used, hence allowing the analysis in the following chapter to be more concise. Nevertheless, as argued by Doyle (2002, 120), print media, especially lifestyle and educational titles, primarily caters to the affluent strata, which as previously discussed, is the main target group of the American Express cards, thus providing advertisers in general with better chances of reaching this specific sector of the market regardless. Although the

research would benefit from such knowledge, the lack of it does not in any way jeopardize its outcome.

3.1.2. Selecting the Ad-Campaigns

From the six American Express ad-campaigns which were introduced in Chapter 2, my sample consists of three. The main reason for my choices was to follow the evolution of the ad-campaigns, thus capturing the diachronic changes in the way the American Express card was portrayed and consequently how its sign value was constructed along the years. The first campaign to be analyzed in the following chapter is *'Membership Has Its Privileges'* (1987 – 1996), which was the first print ad campaign of the American Express card, with the purpose of analyzing the ideas and meanings behind the first print attempt to position the American Express card in the consumers' minds on print media. The second campaign is *'My Life. My Card.'* (2004 – 2007), which was the first campaign for the American Express card to circulate for such a short time, which surprised many in both the advertising industry and consumers that were used to the American Express long-running campaigns. The purpose is to give the reader a point of reference in the timeframe between the two extreme points in the history of the American Express cards' campaign – its beginning and today. Another decisive point for choosing *'My Life. My Card'* (2004 – 2007), was the fact that I was able to gather a lot of samples of its print adverts, which allowed me to perform a more complete analysis of the campaign. Finally, the last campaign in my sample is *'Realise The Potential.'* (2009 – 2012), which is the print campaign currently³¹ in circulation, so that we can see how the American Express card is currently being portrayed. Choosing those specific campaigns, with a difference of eight and five years between them, respectively, also allows me to grasp the transformations that happened over greater amounts of time, making it more likely to observe the critical changes. It is also important to highlight the fact, as will be discussed in the following pages, that a poststructuralist approach to textual analysis does not require an in-depth analysis of every single element present on every single advertising piece, since it is mostly concerned with the interpretation process in a more general manner (McKee: 2003, 75). With that in mind, I shall choose the

³¹ **Note to the readers:** I have started this project on 2009, therefore, I shall only use in the research the campaigns that were launched until then.

elements that seem most relevant to my research based both on my expertise and knowledge of the practices within the advertising field and of our contemporary Western consumer culture.

On a final note, I would like to reiterate here that my main guide for the chronology of the campaigns was the article published on The NY Times on April 6th 2007³² [online]. The reason why I have chosen to follow this specific guideline is due to its completeness and the fact that it was published in a renowned newspaper. I have also conducted an online research to find out if any other print campaigns for The Cards were launched after the article had been published in 2007, and discovered that a campaign called '*Realise the Potential.*' had just been released back in 2009, thus complementing the campaigns' chronology. Therefore, only the campaigns named in the article plus the most recent one ('*Realise the Potential.*' (2009 – 2012)) were used as references for my research.

3.1.3. A Poststructuralist Textual Analysis of Advertising Pieces

In order to answer the research questions proposed in the introductory chapter, I have opted to conduct a textual analysis, following a poststructuralist approach. According to Alan McKee's definition (2003: 1), textual analysis is 'an educated guess at some of the most likely interpretations that might be made of [a] text', where a text is everything that can be made sense of, including photographs, films, TV shows, or in the case of this research, adverts. By following a poststructuralist approach, this specific methodology allows me to concentrate on the different ways readers can make sense out of the texts (i.e. the American Express cards' adverts) without having to focus on their values, which are irrelevant for my research. According to the poststructuralist perspective, all the different meanings are equally valid, thus one meaning is no more 'correct' than another (Jensen: 2002, 34), allowing me to fully immerse myself in the role of semiotician. In my analysis, I do not wish to seek the 'right' or 'truthful' interpretation, but rather explore the possible different ways in which the readers might make sense out of the messages being sent by the adverts. However, it is important to emphasize that this does not mean that I, as a textual

³² Available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/06/business/media/06adco.html> [last accessed on March 9th 2011]

analyst, can randomly assign meanings and carelessly interpret the adverts in question. The poststructuralist perspective allows me to find out which interpretations make sense to me, but they are based on my knowledge and expertise in the field where those messages take place. I shall come back to this topic later on this chapter.

Having in mind that textual analysis is about uncovering sense-making processes, making context its starting point, and that advertising pieces are social and culturally situated texts, there are three approaches (or levels of meanings) that one is encouraged to use when analyzing an advert, in order to fully understanding their meanings (1) the surface meaning, (2) the advertiser's intended meaning and (3) the cultural/ideological meanings (Firth: 1997, 4). The first one is concerned with the overall impression left on the reader when taking a quick look at the advert. The second, with what the advertiser is trying to sell (i.e. goods, services, lifestyles, etc.) and the third with the readers' background and cultural knowledge. Although textual analysis is mainly concerned with the interpretations created by the audience (McKee: 2003, 48), it can also be of interest to get to know the meaning intended by the advertisers (i.e. the creators of the texts). According to McKee (ibid. 49), by getting to know what was the meaning intended by the text creator, the researcher benefits from understanding what the texts are about and the meaning of the different elements used in it. However, like a textual analyst, advertisers can only make educated guesses of how their messages will be interpreted, as discussed in Chapter 1.

Advertising has come a long way from merely being a way of making consumers aware of the existence of new products and services, telling them instead the meaning and significance of products and how they communicate a specific lifestyle. As seen in Chapter 1, advertising does that by connecting characteristics of products to cultural features, thus appropriating preexisting meanings in other realms in order to add significance to products and services, while using a speech that whilst talking to a multitude of people, speaks to each of us individually. However, how we as individuals receive those messages is intrinsically dependent upon the culture we are inserted in. How we make sense of the world, or in McKee's (2003, 10) terms, 'experience reality', depends on different aspects of our lives, such as age, education, gender, etc. The culture that we live in limits our sense-making practices, hence the various possible meanings that can be drawn from a single message.

It is never enough to emphasize that this cultural relativism proposed by McKee's textual analysis is typical of poststructuralist approaches (as we shall also

see in the following pages) – it defends the plurality of meanings (or interpretations of reality) and grants equal value to all meanings created. According to poststructuralist approaches, there is no single correct interpretation or better interpretation of any texts (ibid. 63). Following that premise, I will analyze the American Express cards adverts by exploring the different ways the readers may make sense of those texts. Although one may question textual analysis' efficacy as a methodology and argue that it lacks scientific evidence because its results are non-repeatable, it is important to highlight the fact, as put by McKee (ibid. 118), that this specific methodology is mostly part of humanities and not science. Textual analysis is concerned with sense-making practices, which cannot be done scientifically. What will validate my analysis, as briefly mentioned above, is the extensive body of literature that I have selected to guide me in my research as well as my own knowledge of the advertising field – as both a graduate and as an average person exposed to advertising messages – and my empirical experience as a member of the contemporary Western consumer culture. All in all, by performing a poststructuralist textual analysis of the three selected American Express cards' campaigns, it will allow me to go through their different levels of meanings – of both their surface and socio-cultural meanings, as well as see the diachronic changes in their approach.

3.2. Theoretical Overview

In the following chapter, I use semiotics as the main theory to structure my textual analysis. It is important to emphasize here that by using semiotics, which also follows a poststructuralist approach, I am able to not only decode, but also explore the different meanings behind the print ad-campaigns. As pointed out by Barthes (1977, 94), while society communicates through the signifiers of the current system, the job of the semiologist, who speaks its signifieds, is to decipher those signifiers within the social contexts, which naturalizes and masks those signs, thus unveiling ideologies and myths, and that is what I aim to do in Chapter 4.

It is also essential to notice that throughout the analysis, I deliberately use social semiotics when there is a need to theorize and understand context as another set of texts. I also rely on the textual works of a few cultural studies' theorists, such as

Williamson and Hall, in order to illustrate how certain concepts apply in a broader social context.

3.2.1. A Brief Introduction to Semiotics

According to Barthes (1977, 80), Semiotics is ‘a science comprising all systems of signs’, which in broad terms means anything that stands for something else (e.g. words, sounds, photographs, drawings, etc.). It aims at understanding and making sense of the complexities of the signification systems (e.g. images, languages, or in the case of the current research, print advertising pieces). Those are a part of conventions established through time and repetition (Chandler: 2007, 9), hence being deeply connected and understood within the context of a given culture. Although theories of ‘signs’ appear throughout ancient history, the two main traditions in semiotics originated with linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, and philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, and still serve as basis for contemporary theories in the field.

3.2.1.a. Saussure vs. Peirce

According to the Saussurrean theory (Chandler: 2007, 14), the sign is a self-contained dyad composed by a *signifier*, the ‘sound pattern’ or the person’s psychological impression of a certain sound (e.g. the words *Fresh Paint*), what Barthes (1977, 39) claims in his essay to belong to the realm of *expression*; and a *signified* which represents the concept (e.g. the words *Fresh Paint* on a park bench means that those visiting the park should not sit on it at the risk of getting their clothes stained by the paint), and which Barthes (ibid.) claims to belong to the realm of *content*. Both parts are essential in order for something to be classified as a sign and are deeply linked in the mind, although this link is completely arbitrary and must be learned and assimilated by those within the culture (or system). A sign is the product of the relationship between signifier and signified and the linking process between those two parts is called *signification* (ibid. 48). Saussure maintains that in order for signs to be understood and therefore create meaning, they must be a part of a formal, generalized and abstract system. In other words, a sign is only understood by those who share the cultural knowledge in which that sign is embedded.

Having a linguistic background, Saussure was more interested in verbal language rather than visual signs. He believed that language as a system does not reflect reality, but constructs it, supporting the claim of the arbitrariness of the sign and the diverse possibilities to interpret it. This process is explained in the following passage by Barthes (1977, 46-7):

To each system of signifiers there corresponds, on the plane of signifieds, a corpus of practices and techniques; these collections of signifieds imply on the part of system consumers (of 'readers', that is to say), different degrees of knowledge (according to differences in their 'culture'), which explains how the same 'lexie' (or large unit of reading) can be deciphered differently according to the individuals concerned, without ceasing to belong to a different 'language'. Several lexicons – and consequently several bodies of signifieds – can coexist within the same individual, determining in each one more or less 'deep' readings.

This fact does not, however, mean that linguistic signs were completely arbitrary, as he also states that 'a language is not completely arbitrary, for the system has a certain rationality' (ibid. 26). Signifiers must adapt to pre-existing patterns within the language system in question. As part of its social use within a sign-system, every sign gains a history of connotations of its own which are familiar to members of the sign-user's culture. Because there are no formal rules to connect a specific signifier to a signified, it is possible for a signified to have many signifiers and vice-versa (e.g. synonyms and puns, respectively (Chandler: 2007, 25-6)). This highlights the importance of understanding the context in the creation of meaning.

In opposition to Saussure, Peirce does not make language his main focus. Instead he encompasses everything into the concept of sign, as everything means something to someone (Grisrud: 2002, 26-7). He made a three-part model of the sign that is constituted by the *representamen*, the form of the sign (i.e. how it is represented); an *interpretant*, the sense made of the sign (i.e. how it is interpreted); and an *object*, something beyond the sign (i.e. what is represented) (ibid. 29). This model rejects Saussure's self-contained two-part model by stating that the meaning of a sign is not contained within it, but comes with interpretation (semiosis) and reinterpretations. The process of interpretation of the sign can lead to successive infinite chains. To illustrate this, we can take an example given by Grisrud (2002, 29). In a given context, the word 'sun' may be perceived or associated with the term

‘*star*’, which becomes the new interpretant. ‘*Star*’ then maybe taken by some to mean ‘*movie star*’, the third interpretant in the chain and so on.

3.2.1.b. Modes of Signs

According to Peirce, there are three modes (or kinds) of signs (ibid. 30): *symbolical*, *iconic* or *indexical*. These are defined by the arbitrariness or conventionality of the relationship between a *representamen* and its object or its *interpretant* (or by using Saussure’s terms, signifiers and signifieds³³, respectively). These are classified as *Symbolical*, *Iconic* or *Indexical* (Chandler: 2007, 36-7) and are related to the notion of connotation, as will be explained later on.

In the case of the symbolical mode, the signifier has no resemblance to the signified and the connection between them is completely arbitrary or conventional. This connection must be agreed upon and learned (e.g. languages and their particularities, traffic lights, national flags, etc.). According to Peirce, a symbol is ‘a sign which refers to the object that it denotes by virtue of law, usually an association of general ideas, which operates to cause the symbol to be interpreted as referring to that object’ (Peirce in Chandler: 2007, 36).

In the iconic mode, the signifier is seen as emulating or resembling the signified (e.g. cartoons, onomatopoeias, portraits, etc.). An iconic sign represents its object mainly by its similarity, while in the indexical mode, the signifier is not unmotivated, but rather more deeply linked in some way to the signified. According to Chandler (ibid. 37), this link can be observed or inferred (e.g. personal ‘trademarks’ such as handwriting and catch-phrases; natural signs, such as smoke, thunder, footprints, etc). In this mode, the relationship between the sign and the object is not only dependent on interpretation, because there is an actual connection between them (ibid.).

3.2.1.c. Codes

Codes are ‘conventions that associate a signifier with a certain signified or meaning’ (Gripsrud: 2002, 13). They supply a framework within which signs make sense and

³³ Here I will use the Saussurean terminology since it is the most broadly used.

work as interpretative devices, which are used by interpretative communities. According to Chandler (2007, 171) 'codes are dynamic systems which change over time and are thus historically as well as socio-culturally situated'. When investigating practices within a society, any object or action that has meaning to those within the society is taken as a sign. What semiotics aims to find out are the code rules and conventions on which the production and interpretation of meaning within the society (i.e. the creation of signs) is based, thus becoming the key point in understanding meanings in any kind of communication.

There are four types of codes that are relevant in media, communication and cultural studies: social, textual, interpretative and perceptual (Chandler: 2007, 149). Those types match the three preconditions required to interpret a text: knowledge of the world, knowledge of the medium or genre and the knowledge of the relationship between the world and the medium or genre, respectively (ibid.). Although Chandler treats perceptual codes within interpretative codes, I thought it was important to mention it separately, due to its importance in the analysis of print adverts. While the former refers specifically to visual perceptions (e.g. objects that are featured together are associated, while objects that are featured separated are seen as unrelated), the latter refer to a broader spectrum of ideological codes (e.g. individualism and capitalism). Codes are essential in the understanding of connotation, as explained in the following point.

3.2.1.d. Connotation and Denotation

Connotation and denotation constitute the two layers of meaning (van Leeuwen: 2005, 34), making those concepts essential to my research. According to Barthes (1977, 91), who created the most significant method of connotation in semiotics (van Leeuwen 2005, 37), connotation is composed by signifiers, signifieds and the union of those two parts – signification. The signifiers of connotation are fabricated by signs of the denoted system, and its signifieds are deeply connected to culture, knowledge and history. In other words, while denotation means the literal or obvious meaning of a sign, connotation refers to its socio-cultural and 'personal' associations (ideological, emotional, etc.). As an example, we can take a picture of a butterfly. At a denotative level, it is merely a picture of a colorful insect, but at a connotative level, it can be seen to represent transformation and liberty, breaking through or growing up, due to

the fact that it gains wings at a later point in its life. Although connotations are usually related to the interpreter's demographics (age, sex, education, etc.), personal meanings and cognitive processes (Beasley and Danesi: 2002, 103), they are also determined by the codes the interpreter has access to, and following the poststructuralist premises, are dependent on context. Both connotation and denotation are also exposed to historical factors, changing over time.

As argued by Beasley and Danesi (*ibid.*), the study of semiotics of advertising is in fact the study of the connotational system (i.e. the formation of signification by uniting signifiers and signifieds) and as such it is the main focus of the next chapter's textual analysis.

3.2.1.e. Myth

Myth, a concept originally drawn by French semiotician Roland Barthes, is strongly relevant to the analysis of advertising and can be perceived as reflecting major concepts that bases particular ideologies in the world. Myths are complex sign-systems, which make yet more ideological signs, as seen in the argument presented by Chandler (2007. 145):

[The myth's] function is 'to naturalize' the cultural – in other words, to make dominant cultural and historical values, attitudes and beliefs seem entirely natural, normal, self-evident, timeless, obvious common sense – and thus objective and true reflections of the 'way things are'.

According to Barthes (1972: 131), what allows the reader to absorb myths in such a passive way is that he does not see them as a semiotic system (i.e. as a system of values, that is open to interpretation), but as a system of facts. The reader instead sees a causal process (i.e. the signifier and signified having a natural relationship) where there is just equivalence. This makes the deconstruction of contemporary myths very difficult, since the concept of belonging to a culture also implies taking for granted many of the major ideologies.

In advertising, myths are used as a positioning technique, where they are exploited by practitioners in order to awake our deepest fears and worries (e.g. the search for beauty and success, the fear of death, etc.) to create an urgent desire toward a specific product (Beasley and Danesi: 2002, 12-3).

3.2.2 Rhetorical Figures

Rhetoric is the art, practice and science that concerns both written and spoken language and is about preparing, structuring and shaping discourses to successfully communicate them. Rhetoric recognizes the link between ‘knowing something’ and ‘knowing how to communicate about it’ (Jensen: 2002, 19), thus requiring a deep understanding of those to whom the discourse is addressed. A way to articulate rhetoric is by the usage of rhetorical figures, which are defined as artful deviations from the expectations within a given text (McQuarrie and Mick 1996, 425) and can be found in both visual and verbal contexts. According to the rhetorical approach, the way in which a statement is expressed could be more important than its content (ibid. 424). There are two modes of rhetorical figures: schemes (e.g. rhyme, anaphora, parison, etc.) and tropes (e.g. metaphor, hyperbole, ellipsis, etc.). While the former represents deviations through the way in which signs are combined in a sentence (e.g. ‘*She only carries plastic.*’, implying that the person only carries credit cards in her wallet, instead of cash), the latter is a deviation in how signs are selected (e.g. ‘One must work to live and not live to work.’, the inverse use of the words live and work). Tropes are words or sentences that allow different ways of expressing how things are. In semiotic terms, tropes are undercoded and incomplete and require additional interpretations, while schemes are overcoded, carrying more information than what is required for the decoding process of the message (McQuarrie and Mick: 1996, 428 and 1999, 44).

According to Chandler (2007, 124), rhetorical figures allow us to see a certain thing in the terms of another, and its understanding (especially tropes, due to its complexity) requires the knowledge of certain particularities within the society. Its usage in print advertising aims at capturing the readers’ attention, engaging them to fill in the gaps, in order to create a positive attitude towards the ad. As in any semiotic system, the reader must be familiar with the cultural settings in which the ad is embedded. The meanings that are constructed through the stimulation by tropes are not on the ads themselves, but rather on interpretations made by the readers and which are based on their cultural knowledge. It is also important to stress that what is actually relevant to the textual analysis in the next chapter is how and why those

figures are used in the composition of the ads and not an in-depth analysis of each figure used.

Chapter 4

Textual Analysis

In this chapter I conduct a textual analysis of the selected print ad-campaigns of the American Express cards. I have chosen to analyze alternating print campaigns, beginning with the very first one dating back to 1987. I apply semiotics in order to decipher the underlying meanings of the campaigns and to learn about their meaning structures. As explained in the previous chapter, the meaning of a sign is dependent on the context in which it is used. In order to determine their meanings as well as the ideologies behind them I assess the different elements that together help the ad campaigns convey the ideas of prestige and prominent lifestyle that became the trademark of the American Express cards.

As seen in Chapter 3, all of The Cards' print campaigns with the exception of *'Realise the Potential.'* (2009 – 2012), rely mainly on the use of photography, which has something tautological in them by nature, such as how it always carries its referent along with it (Barthes: 2005, 5). Although it is not impossible to become aware of what it signifies, it requires a secondary action of knowledge and reflection. Also, as pointed out by Kates and Goh (2003, 67), when consumers connect to commercial texts and products, they substantiate the brand's symbolic values. This is the very process that I analyze and explore in the following pages – how the American Express cards print adverts try to establish this connection with consumers and consequently create their cards' sign value.

I start the analysis with *'Membership Has Its Privileges.'* (1987 – 1996), which was the first print campaign for the American Express card. I then proceed to *'My Life. My Card.'* (2004 – 2007) and then I finalize this chapter with the analysis of *'Realise the Potential.'* (2009 – 2012), which was the current campaign in circulation (2012).

4.1. 'Membership Has Its Privileges.' (1987 – 1996)

“Membership Has Its Privileges.” was the first printed campaign for the American Express card. The campaign was composed of double-page printed pieces and was circulated from 1987 until 1996. According to Evans and Schmalensee (2005, 186), the campaign’s main goal was to ‘cultivate elite customers used to living large’.

From all the American Express card campaigns, *‘Membership Has Its Privileges.’* (1987 – 1996) is the one that most employs the American Express card as a signifier of status and a pass to an ‘elite club’. By itself, the noun ‘membership’ implies belonging to a group, but in the case of the campaign, ‘membership’ becomes much more than that as it connotes that the carrier of the American Express card is a part of a very special, select group with numerous advantages. By emphasizing the advantages of being a member, the campaign distances its customers from the others who do not possess the card, the *unprivileged* ones. If you are not a member, if you do not have an American Express card, you cannot enjoy the lifestyle of the celebrities and cardmembers – you are excluded from the privileged ‘club’. This concept of ‘belonging’ and being a part of a special group was again reintroduced and reinforced by the campaign *‘Are You a Cardmember?’*, which ran from 2007 until 2009.

4.1.1. The Use of Celebrities

The campaign relied mainly on juxtaposition of celebrities and the American Express card in order to convey its message³⁴. It featured a celebrity photograph on the left page with the name of the celebrity on the right, followed by the phrase *‘Cardmember since (...)’*. When celebrities are featured in ads, the purpose is to transfer their attributes (i.e. their signifieds) to the product, becoming their signifier. This transference of meaning only happens in the advert. The transference of the attributes from a celebrity to a product is a traditional and common practice done by advertisers to fully exploit the referent system (i.e. the system of signs from which the product is trying to draft its image) of that specific person. In order for this transference to be successful, it is essential that the reader is familiar with the featured celebrity. As pointed out by Williamson (1978: 27), advertising takes over the former relationships of pre-existing systems of differences, so that the identification of the celebrity’s

³⁴ In this campaign, although words do say something, they do not convey the meaning of the ads. According to Williamson (1978: 90), ads that do not rely on words obtain their purpose from the tacit assumption that words are not necessary to sell such quality products. The image speaks for itself, working as the entire signifying system of the product.

referent system happens in opposition to other celebrities, since signs can only have value in opposition to another sign; in this case, another celebrity. The differences between the referent systems was not created by advertising, but merely appropriated by it. This link created by the juxtaposition of a celebrity and a product is mostly random, since there are no real connections between the celebrity and the product and it relies purely on assumption. So what the celebrity *means* to us is also what the product is trying to convey us as well. By using celebrities American Express creates different identities (or expropriates it) for its brand and products.

If we take a closer look at the advert with Sophia Loren, **Figure 2.1** (cf.), what the signifier ‘Sophia Loren’ means to most of us is likely to be glamour, success, beauty, talent, etc., which is what the American Express card is trying to signify us as well. In this case, as Williamson (ibid.) points out, advertising works as a meta-system (or metastructure) where the structure of a system is used to give structure to another system, and where values from different areas of our lives become interchangeable. It is only because we recognize Sophia Loren as a glamorous, successful actress (i.e. give her significance) that we are able to transfer those qualities to the American Express card. According to the author (ibid. 100), we can understand this process as follows: Photo/Image → Denotes *Sophia Loren* → Connotes *glamour, sophistication, beauty, etc.*

Glamour, as explained by Berger (1972: 124-6), is constituted by envy and is conveyed by advertising as a transformation in someone’s life or appearance made by the consumption of a certain product. Glamour is about being the object of careful observation and envy, but not about observing. The train of thought can be described as advertising offering a glamorous picture of the reader’s future self who had already been transformed by the consumption of the product in question. The reader then becomes envious of his future self-improved persona, but what makes the reader’s improved-self enviable, is the envy of others. The reader then supposedly imagines himself as being the object of envy, like those persons in the advertisement. In **Figure 4.1**, Braga is also the object of envy, but differently from Loren’s staring eyes, Braga looks away from the envious looks of the readers who reinforce her glamour. This explanation is complementary to Williamson’s (1978, 60-61) ‘*mirror phase*’ concept, where she explains that advertising offers the reader a symbol of desire, i.e. the improved self, which feeds off of our longing for coherence and meaning. Although differently from Berger who believes that coherence and meaning for women is

related to men's perceptions of them, Williamson believes that those concepts differ across societies, thus cannot be taken as absolute and timeless. According to Berger (ibid.), being the object of envy is a lonely way of reassurance, since the experience cannot be shared with those who envy, because in its event, the object (i.e. the person who was previously envied) becomes less enviable, less special. This assures what has been discussed in Chapter 1 – that advertising is not about objects, but social relations.

In **Figure 4.1** on the left page is a picture of Brazilian actress Sonia Braga and on the right page the copy reads: '*Sonia Braga. Cardmember since 1986.*', complemented by the campaign's slogan '*Membership Has Its Privileges*' and the iconic green card on the bottom, which encourages the reader to make the connection between the American Express card and the picture. As explained by Goldman and Papson (1996: 22), in print ads, 'a caption is designed to make meaningful the relationship between product and image', thus creating an axis of combination, where meanings are created. According to the authors, when framed, images become unhinged from their original location, so the viewers have to look at the caption in order to find out how to recombine it, and what is then accomplished by this recombination of meanings is, roughly, the creation of the commodity sign.

4.1.2. The Absent Male

The most significant element in the ad featuring Loren's (**Figure 3.1**) is the full use of her image as a signifier of glamour, sexiness and beauty, i.e. the way Loren suggestively shows off her shoulders and cleavage, while smiling and looking directly at the reader³⁵ – the absent male. This is ultimately converted to success. According to Vestergaard and Schröder (1985: 84), this is the basic rationale of female beautification infused by advertising itself – in order to be successful a woman ought to be pretty. Berger (1972: 40) explains the logic behind this myth. According to him:

(...) a woman's presence expresses her own attitude to herself, and defines what can and cannot be done to her. Her presence is manifest in her gestures,

³⁵ In his work '*Visual Persuasion*' (1997: 21), Messaris states that due to the iconicity of visual images, the process of capturing the viewer's attention is done by the use of real-world interpersonal interaction elements, such as facial expressions, gestures and bodily cues. This is the most important role among the different attentional cues that are directly copied from real behavior and is exploited at this specific advert.

voice, opinions, expressions, clothes, chosen surroundings, taste – indeed there is nothing she can do which does not contribute to her presence.

Berger (ibid.) then explains that because women had their space confined to the keeping of men, they have split their personality into two different personas – the surveyor and the surveyed. The first surveys everything she is and does, because of how she appears to others and consequently to men, is how she measures the success in her life. The latter is a form of gaining control of how she looks, and ultimately is treated by men. The surveyor treats the surveyed in a way to show others how her whole self would like to be treated, and finally the relationship between her two different personas constitutes her presence. How a woman presents herself is how she would like to be seen, and the more appealing she is, the more attention she will garner from men especially. According to Berger's argument, this is her ultimate goal and equals success.

To Williamson (1978: 80) such a provocative setting signifies the absence of the male character in the advert, working as a cue for the male spectator to fill in for the absent man. According to Williamson (ibid.), 'women (in media) are entirely constituted by the gaze of men', and although the man character is nowhere to be found in the advert, he is 'a pervasive presence defining and determining everything, and in whose terms the woman must define herself. She is doomed to see herself through *his* eyes, describe herself in his language'. To Williamson (ibid.), in some cases, the presence of women in adverts are mere symbols used to reinforce the power of men, which is one of the main points discussed by Jean Kilbourne in her work '*Can't Buy My Love*' (1999). In her book, Kilbourne deeply explores the issue of how women are portrayed by advertising, and its potential consequences. The author claims that adverts in which women's bodies are portrayed as men's sexual objects exert a pivotal role in the perpetuation of the male dominance in our societal values, reinforcing the power exerted by advertising in Western cultures. According to her, although advertising is not directly responsible for some of the serious problems in society such as addictions, eating disorders and victimization of women, it does help create a situation in which women feel disconnected from other people, and in more dangerous cases from themselves, which may lead to those issues. Kilbourne believes ads like these portray women as submissive and powerless in the hope to create desire not towards the women, but the product. However, an interesting point of contention

to raise here is whether or not Kilbourne herself, in her struggle against perceived male dominance, is not taking power away from women by suggesting that they are incapable of seeing an aesthetically pleasing picture of another woman without feeling threatened or insecure to the point of self-harm. In her insistence on women as victims, she is helping to perpetuate the myth of the 'weaker sex' in Western society.

Although one might strongly disagree that the purpose of featuring Loren in the campaign was to boost male readers' egos by reaffirming their power over yet another submissive woman, the sensual tone of the ad is undeniable. But what is particularly interesting is the way sensuality is played out in the advert. Featured in the ad is a successful, talented woman who seems to be in control of her sensuality and of her own life. She emanates the confidence associated with modern, independent women – she does not depend on any man (and why would she when she has an American Express card?), but she can still use her charm when she pleases, and in the ad, she wants you to get an American Express card. This entire meaning-making process develops under the envious eyes of the female readers, as explained previously.

The other elements in the ad such as the expensive tapestry (which can be seen as a kind of art in its own right), the silky robe Loren is wearing and the red toned colors work in conjunction as signifiers to Loren's success and exquisite taste, while reinforcing the advert's sensual connotation. The elements in the background of **Figure 2.1** are by no chance arbitrary and are meant to strengthen and create coherence between Loren's referents, which were evoked by the ad (i.e. beauty, success, glamour). Those referents are then ultimately converted to attributes of the American Express card. In this framework, the scene also works as a cue, leading the male reader to take place in the narrative as the absent person.



(Image: Sardineacademy.com)

Figure 4.1: 'Membership Has Its Privileges' ad featuring Brazilian actress Sonia Braga.

The same approach is roughly seen in **Figure 4.1**, where the ad's imagery also remits us to the fact that Braga is the object of gaze of the absent male. Self-fetishism can be seen as a path to success in a woman's life, ultimately legitimizing the myth of male power in our society. Using a more current approach, Goldman and Papson (1996: 98-9) explain the reason for why this kind of gender portrait fell into disuse in advertising by stating that this patriarchal hegemony is outdated and an anachronism that marketing practices could not continue to afford. The development of consumer markets have since detached from commodity form and patriarchal hegemony.

4.1.3. Nature as a Referent System

It is important to note that even if the reader has no recollection or knowledge of who Sonia Braga is, the message can still be deciphered and decoded, since the pictorial background also works as a signifier. The sand dunes signify exoticness and earthiness, and the fact that she is in such a reclusive place can also be interpreted as an exclusive place for those who are members of that special club (i.e. only American

Express takes you to such exotic places) and/or that American Express is everywhere you want to be, even on your reclusive getaways. The freedom she appears to enjoy also starkly contrasts to city life and what is almost certainly the hectic lives of the financially successful people who are ‘chosen’ to be cardmembers. The natural background represents a moment of leisure and escape from the busy work life, which according to Wernick (Nava et al [ed.]: 1997, 209-10), can be seen as compensation for the lack of satisfaction and identity caused by the harsh demands of work life. The author also points out that the themes of Nature, escape and leisure are usually interchangeably linked in advertising, as when leisure is portrayed by advertising, it is often depicted by imagery of nature and is meant to be an escape from the busy working life. This emphasis on leisure came as a result of the economic boom made possible by new technological advances and new flexible working arrangements that ran counter to older systems such as Fordism (Tomaney in Amin [ed.]: 1994, 158-59). In this new environment it is interesting to note how advertising has changed from a happy attitude towards hard work as a way to prosperity in the 1950’s (i.e. the fulfillment of the so-called ‘*American Dream*’), to leisure and time off from this stressful environment around the 1990’s. To Leiss et al. (2005, 540), the escape to the desert is associated with one’s search for individualism, as it is seen as a place where one can test its strength and live by their own rules. This longing for the exotic can also be seen as a strong expression of cosmopolitanism and self-actualizing, that characterizes those with high cultural capital (Holt: 1998, 13). As discussed in Chapter 1, for this group leisure is as a way of immersing themselves into the unknown, the world of the other. It is about the experience and how it can enrich their lives.

As pointed out by Vestegaard and Schrøder (1985: 160), this idyllic background can be a way of using the ideology of Nature in favor of the product – the ad is trying to sell the American Express card, a product that does not have the remotest of connections with nature, by imposing it as a referent system, thus emptying Nature as a signified and using it as a signifier of the product instead. When we think of Nature, we think of something lasting and unchanging by the intervention of culture, and existing beyond it. Still, according to Vestergaard and Schrøder (ibid.), the appropriation of its ideology is done in order to ‘allow culture to appropriate the positive qualities, deprived of their substance, to industrially manufactured products’.

Nature, as described by Williamson (1978: 103), is the primary referent system of any culture, thus any reader can easily recognize and relate to it. We can see the same practice applied in **Figure 4.2**.



(Image: Sardineacademy.com)

Figure 4.2: Ad featuring French-American cellist Yo Yo Ma. The copy reads 'Yo Yo Ma. Cardmember since 1978.'

In **Figure 4.2** we see Yo Yo Ma, a French-American cellist, holding his instrument. In the background we see a forest, and by the yellow-orange color of the trees and leaves, we can tell that it is around mid-autumn. What grabs our attention in the ad is the cello, showed in contrast to the artist's black garments. The instrument would have almost completely disappeared in the yellow-orange background if not contrasted by the garments.

The fact that American Express has chosen, out of all celebrities, to use a relatively little known, high-culture musician in its campaign, is quite compelling and serves a very specific purpose, as will be discussed in the following section.

4.1.4. Cultural Capital

It is interesting to note the chosen celebrities for this campaign: although they are all famous in their respective professions, they are not mainstream artists and it certainly requires a certain cultural capital to identify them, even though their names can be read on the right side of the adverts. Cultural capital, the concept drawn by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu explained in Chapter 1, is interestingly discussed by Gibbons in her work *'Art & Advertising'* (2005: 134). She defines cultural capital as 'the accumulation of knowledge, competencies and goods that have been acquired in order to mark out a position in the rankings and hierarchies of society'. Gibbons goes on and explains that in our society, where the boundaries between high and low culture become more and more blurred, cultural capital has come to be measured by 'the ability to take up a knowing position in a far more expansive field of cultural capital that includes niche and subcultural groups'. For the author, this change in the ethos of our society can be seen as 'a move away from a consumer culture that validates through the material possession (...), towards a consumer culture which is based on *'savoir-faire'* in which self-identity is a kind of cultural resource, asset, or possession' (ibid.). In this context, art and its connotations, have always been used to signify this kind of knowledge. In order to make clear the distinctions of high culture and create a link with their products, advertising usually relies on those associations, such as seen in this campaign by American Express. It takes full advantage of those changes in order to hail *only* to its main consumer targets.

The use of more restrictive codes in advertising happens in order to limit its interpretation to a more selective group and position the product within it. That is why the work of the advertiser is then to come up with marketing research containing the right stimuli in order to produce the right reaction within the specific group (Kline and Leiss: 1972, 18). Advertisers attempt to refine the symbolic dimensions of the product to suit the specific market.

In the ad, Braga is wearing a white delicate dress on top of a sand dune. Her flowing dress complements the lines made by the wind on the sand. Braga is positioned in the exact middle of the dune, where we can see a shaped curve, between two textures of sand – one rough and one smooth. The photographic setting described above remits the reader to the art genre of oil painting, where similar elements fit perfectly with the ones described by Berger (1972: 132): '(...) the exotic and

nostalgic attraction of the Mediterranean (...); the poses taken up to denote stereotypes of woman (...); the treatment of distance by perspective, offering mystery (...)'.

According to the author (ibid. 128-9) the analogy between art, and especially the field of oil painting and advertising pieces, is not coincidental and is done in order to convey legitimacy to the message being sent. This has two purposes: it suggests cultural authority and is a sign of affluence. Art belongs to the fortunate ones and connotes wealth, while oil painting (or any type of painting for that matter) as Berger puts it, was a celebration of private possessions.

This practice is also quite clear in **Figure 6.2**, where it features Yo Yo Ma, who plays the cello, which is associated with a more sophisticated segment, is featured. Music, according to Bourdieu (1984, 10-11), is the pure art as it speaks to one's spirit and transcends knowledge and experience and is an evident social mark of the cultural elite, as seen in the following passage (ibid.):

(...) nothing more clearly affirms one's 'class', nothing more infallibly classifies, than tastes in music. This is of course because, by virtue of the rarity of the conditions for acquiring the corresponding dispositions, there is no more 'classificatory' practice than concert-going or playing a noble instrument (...)

By requiring a certain level of cultural capital from readers, the ad only allows those who possess it, to decode its meaning successfully. Music, in that case, works to legitimate the social and cultural differences of those with high cultural capital from those with low.

4.1.5. Summary: Employing Myths

'Membership Has Its Privileges.' (1987 – 1996) shows not only how the American Express card can offer its card members financial credit, but also how it can enrich their lives in various ways – either by adding glamour (or by being a glamorous statement in itself), by expanding their cultural capital, or by allowing them take a break from their busy lives. The campaign mainly uses the practice of 'mirroring' (Williamson: 1978, 60), explained previously in Chapter 1, creating and presenting us with a better version of ourselves, what we are yet to be – the rationale and meaning within us – in order to represent to us our own personal desires. According to

Goldman and Papson (1994, 30), this campaign is a typical example of advertising between 1950 and 1980, focusing on the readers' idealized leisure life instead of its everyday life and lack of glamour. The ads of '*Membership Has Its Privileges.*' (1987 – 1996) can also be taken as examples of what Vermehrer (Firth [ed.]: 1997, 205-6) calls 'high advertising' – in which the product itself is not the main focus, assuming instead a background function, while it centralizes the reader's attention on feelings of luxury and acquiring a higher status within a social hierarchy. It portrays the American Express card as a symbol for prestige and social status, by associating the card to high culture and glamour. In the same vein, it is important to bring up the fact that privilege is also defined by the Oxford American Dictionary as 'something regarded as a rare opportunity and bringing particular pleasure', which is exactly the message conveyed by campaign – each advert shows the reader a different way of acquiring pleasure in their busy lives.

The way '*Membership Has Its Privileges.*' (1987 – 1996) conveys its message by the exploitative use of myths. In **Figure 2.1** and **4.1** the ads use both Sophia Loren's and Sonia Braga's sex-appeal in order to create a seductive atmosphere for male readers while creating envy in the female readers, exploiting the myth of beauty in our society. It can be debated whether this argument is as convincing now as when the campaign was launched, as people today tend to see it as an old-fashioned look on the female role in contemporary Western society. However, the argument that beauty is a marker of success is still valid and used by advertisers. Although women have conquered their space and have come far in conciliating their careers with their families and homes, beauty is still important to many of them, and should not have an automatic negative connotation. There is an entirely different facet to female beauty and sensuality that does not hinge on male appreciation. In fact, it may actually possess some measure of power over them, and is possibly something women use to further their own ends. While women in most parts of the world today are still regarded as the 'weaker sex', one ought to bear in mind that they have only been seen as 'empowered' in Western society for the past few decades. The ads featuring Loren and Braga can be read as both an acknowledgement and support of the accomplishments achieved by women in this struggle for their individualities and space in our contemporary Western society. Those adverts are a clear example of what was discussed in one of the points in Chapter 1 – of how advertising uses ideology to reflect socio-economic changes, while providing behavioral cues

associated with products (Leiss et al.: 2005, 74). In this case, the American Express cards becomes the facilitator of those changes.

The use of the myth of nature is employed as a way to remind the reader that from time to time we all need a break from our busy lives in order to reconnect with ourselves. Nature becomes a place where we can replenish our energy and get in touch with our humanity – an approach still in use by advertisers today. By exploiting this aspect of nature, American Express is portraying its cards as keys that enable its customers to perform those same actions. In **Figure 4.1** it is interesting to note the use of nature (i.e. the sand dunes in the desert), as pointed out by Holt (1998, 13) and discussed previously, which can also be seen as a way to express one's search for individualism. In this perspective, the desert background complements what has been discussed on the previous paragraph and symbolizes women's search for their own individualities and conquests.

4.2. 'My Life. My Card.' (2004 – 2007)

The campaign 'My Life. My Card.' (2004 – 2007) featured double-page ads with celebrities and their handwritten signatures. In the second phase, the ads kept the same layout as 'Membership Has Its Privileges' (1987 – 1996), but instead it featured celebrities in a relaxing moment on the left page (in comparison to the glamorized pictures) and their filled out questionnaire on the right (in comparison to only one phrase). Following this layout, one of the ads was just a blank questionnaire sheet, encouraging the participation of the reader by answering the questions. This campaign did not feature a specific product and can be seen as an almost 'pure' example of sign value, where only imagery (i.e. the company's logo, slogan and sign) and not the product itself, is being shown to convey the American Express card (Goldman and Papson: 1996, 26).

According to Newswire.ca³⁶, the campaign aimed to communicate the role the American Express brand plays in the lives of the celebrities showcased and also to '[strengthen] the appeal of American Express as the ultimate brand for consumers who live life to the fullest.' One of the campaign's main goals was also to broaden its consumer base following the legacy of the previous campaign 'Do More' (1996-

³⁶ Available at <http://www.newswire.ca/en/releases/mmnr/amex/> [last accessed on July 1st 2011]

2004). In order to do so, they used celebrities from different areas to connect with the different consumer segments, what Kates and Goh (2003) call '*brand morphing*'. So what we see in this campaign is a wide variety of celebrities, from sportsmen to movie directors, each conveying a different facet of the American Express brand, creating relevance to yet new market branches. And what they all have in common is the American Express card.

4.2.1. 'Keeping it Real'

The fact that the campaign was constructed in order to show celebrities in their 'real' lives, away from the glamour normally associated with their celebrity lifestyle, is a way to convey to the reader that it does not matter how busy or successful a person is - at a certain point we all have to slow down and enjoy the little things in life. For that to be able to happen, we need the help of someone we can always trust – who can make those things possible and is always there – and that is when you need American Express. When we think of celebrities, we hardly think of them in their pajamas, for example. Or sitting down and reading a book or simply enjoying a quiet moment. Those are things many of us take for granted due to their normality and routine, but that we picture as being unusual and unnatural for celebrities. According to Gibbons (2005: 136), the use of celebrities by advertising takes advantage of 'the consumer's narcissistic impulses by suggesting or mirroring an idealized self'. The author argues that this is the result of an important shift in the 1980s in how consumers subjectivities are addressed, in which they see themselves as active and important parts of what Gibbons calls 'self-generated narratives' and the need of models, in this case celebrities, to assist in this process. Celebrities then represent the identity and ethos of the brand, in this case the American Express company, and are featured in the ads to give the company meaning and personality. The way in which this transfer of meanings is achieved is in the metastructure of advertising, by showing the consumers what they would like to be – an improved version of themselves, and more importantly, how the product (i.e. the American Express card) can help them achieve that.

In one of his texts Mendelson (2007, 174) argues that due to celebrities existing in another realm besides that of 'fiction' and 'on-screen', it makes it more

likely for others to believe that they as ‘normal’ people (i.e. their own selves) are more real than characters in stories. So even though this moment of ‘realness’ is being staged for the ads’ purposes, by featuring celebrities in their ‘real’ lives, the reader is more likely to trust the message due to their role in front of the cameras. An interesting concept featured in **Figure 4.3** is the concept of home. As explained by Corrigan (1997, 97), since Victorian times due to the restrictions imposed by the working environment, home became the place where one could truly be oneself. The concept of home (as opposed to work) was only constructed after industrialization, as a place where not only one could rest after a day of hard labor, but where one could freely express oneself.



(Image: Newswire.ca)

Figure 4.3: ‘My Life. My Card.’ ad featuring American comedian and talk show host Ellen DeGeneres.

Figure 4.3 is an example of the first batch of ‘My Life. My Card.’ print ads. It features the popular American comedian and talk show hostess Ellen DeGeneres in what appears to be her kitchen, playing cards with a dog. The cup of coffee and the toast on the table, plus the fact that DeGeneres is still in her pajamas, tells the reader that it is early in the morning. The casual atmosphere of the ad helps convey that playing cards

with her pet is quite a common activity for her during her leisure time. The ad is completed with her signature on the white strip which alludes to the signature strip on the back of credit cards, and the campaign's slogan '*My Life. My Card.*', which also seems to have been handwritten by the comedian. Handwriting, as pointed out by Leiss et al. (2005, 547), is a sign of uniqueness, that is often used to contrast mass production and interpersonal relations derived from the digital revolution. However, what is special about this ad is the absence of verbal anchoring, since the ad lacks a headline and copy, leaving its interpretation to the readers. When we read both the image and the copy together, we can conclude that the picture setting is meant to communicate DeGeneres' life, while the white strip, an indexical allusion to a credit card, *her* credit card, thus completing the campaign's idea and making clear to the reader that both her life and her credit card are interchangeable and that American Express (i.e. her card), lets her have her life the exact way she wants (even if it means playing cards with her dog in the mornings), working as a catalyst in the metastructure of the ad. The fact that DeGeneres is pictured in her home, a place that is associated with family life and security (Corrigan: 1997, 110), also reinforces the link between those qualities and the company (i.e. home → family life, security → American Express).

Going back to Mendelson (2007, 173), another point discussed by him concerns images and their validity. According to him, for the readers to believe what is being shown, it has to be consistent with previous evidence based on direct observations. So if we take a look at the ad featuring DeGeneres, for example, what for some people would be inconsistent to their image or persona (to be at home playing cards with their dog), for DeGeneres, who is famous for her irreverent sense of humor and for her advocacy of animals rights (which will be discussed later on this analysis), it is not.

As already extensively discussed in the previous analysis, the use of celebrities in advertising has the purpose of transferring the referent system associated with a specific person to the product - in this case the American Express brand. In this ad, humor is conveyed by unexpectedness and is the main element used that communicates the message. So by featuring Ellen DeGeneres, American Express is not

only trying to make full use of her popularity and household name³⁷, but they are using her popularity to transfer her qualities (i.e. fun, playful, jovial, etc. – i.e. her referent system) to the brand. In this specific ad, DeGeneres' qualities are emphasized by the rather unexpected fact that she is playing poker with a dog.

4.2.2. Humor

The fact that DeGeneres is featured in the ad with an animal is no surprise to those who follow her career, since she is a strong advocate for animal rights and frequently uses her talk show to create awareness about the cause. DeGeneres is also the co-owner of Halo, a company that makes natural food for cats and dogs³⁸. This link between the comedian and animals is also explored in one of the campaign's TV spots. In the ad, the comedian is featured with different animals, from elephants and llamas to penguins and crickets, that all work in the production of her TV show. The spot is both funny and clever and shows DeGeneres getting to work and having a meeting with her 'animal crew' before going live with her show. In the ad, she refers to them all by names and by the way she interacts with them the viewers can get a glimpse of their distinctive personalities. Like the TV spot, **Figure 4.3** makes use of the rhetorical potential of personification (a rhetorical trope) to achieve humor.

Humor is also the main element in **Figure 4.3**. For many years the usage of humor in advertising has been the subject of debates among marketing and advertising practitioners (Beard 2008). From having a bad reputation in the beginning of the 1900's to being widely accepted in the 2000's, a lot of the debate around humor regarding whether or not its efficacy could be translated to a rise in product sales. Although today its persuasion and comprehension efficacy is still not completely clear due to its subjectivity and lack of conclusive studies, many professionals within the advertising and marketing fields defend it as being 'a universal language that humanizes advertising, allowing the communicator to speak to the member of his audience on their own level.' (Sternthal and Craig: 1973, 12). Also, as argued by Beard (2008, 28), while others seem to believe that humor is not very persuasive in the long run, due of its tendency to tire out faster than a serious approach. Most seem

³⁷ DeGeneres has a daily talk show called 'The Ellen DeGeneres Show', which is recorded at the Warner Bros Studios in California. Since its start in 2003 the show has won many different awards, including thirty-one Daytime Emmy Awards. (Available at <http://ellen.warnerbros.com/about/> [last accessed on July 4th 2011])

³⁸ Available at <http://www.halopets.com/> [last accessed on September 2nd 2011]

to agree that it intensifies the audience's attention in the first few exposures, creating a positive mood and stimulating the viewers to engage with the brand.

As seen in Chapter 2, in order to appeal to a different segment, while still focusing on their current customers, the company launched the campaign '*Do More.*' (1996 – 2004) in which they relied on the popularity of famous comedian Jerry Seinfeld. Seinfeld was both the star and co-creator of the homonymous sitcom, which was a big success and is still in syndication in many countries all over the world today (2012). Seinfeld appeared in a series of the campaign's TV spots with his hero, Superman³⁹. In the spots, Seinfeld and Superman are on a road trip, and although Superman tries his best to fulfill his super-hero duties and save those in need, it is always Seinfeld's American Express card that ends up saving the day. In the TV spots, Seinfeld becomes the super-hero and his American Express card his super-power. Following the shift in the portraying of the American Express card, we see DeGeneres substituting Seinfeld as the comic persona of American Express. Her role in '*My Life. My Card.*' (2004 – 2007) campaign is the same as Seinfeld's in '*Do More*' (1996 – 2004) – to use humor and personal charisma to appeal to yet another segment of current and potential cardmembers, as well as to give the American Express card a humorous and playful image, while still keeping the upscale segment in mind.

What is interesting to note is that when giving this new humorous facet to their products, American Express exploits certain peculiarities of both Seinfeld and DeGeneres (i.e. not only the fact that they are both comedians, but also his admiration for Superman and her engagement to the animal rights cause, respectively) to communicate their message. This is a clear example of intertextuality and how advertising borrows its meanings from other cultural texts. Although it did not necessarily affect the humor of the messages or its understanding to some extent (i.e. the spots and ads can still be funny regardless of one's previous knowledge about the comedians and their careers and still associate fun with the American Express cards), the full understanding of their references, and consequently the full understanding of its meanings, were restricted to those who had previous knowledge of their work, allowing the referent system to reach a deeper level. This is explained by Goldman

³⁹ The series of TV spots were a clear reference to Seinfeld's sitcom, where many references to the cartoon super-hero are made (especially in the episode 'The Race'). In most of the episodes one can also see Superman's figurine on Seinfeld's shelf, between some record albums and as a magnet on his fridge.

and Papson (1996, 37) as advertisers trying to restore the pleasure in reading texts and rewarding some of the readers with the full understanding of the different layers of meaning, making them feel like a part of a selected group. In semiotic terms, the ads borrowed their meaning from references in other realms (in this case TV shows), and then rearranged them in order to transfer this meaning to the American Express cards, and deplete them of their primary meaning. As explained by Williamson (1978, 19), advertising borrows its meanings from other areas of the society, thus its meanings are never confined within its own structure.

In yet another possible interpretation, it can be argued that the ad featuring DeGeneres is an iconic allusion to the famous series of oil paintings by C. M. Coolidge entitled '*Dogs Playing Poker*', which were produced between 1906 and 1934, in which a group of dogs are featured in human-like activities, such as watching a baseball match, playing snooker, drinking beers and playing poker⁴⁰. These paintings are quite well known within the American culture, being referenced in episodes of *The Simpsons*, featured on TV spots for *ESPN* and appearing in video games, such as *EverQuest*⁴¹. Although using a different approach (i.e. a humorous one, in opposition to the glamor seen in the '*Membership Has Its Privileges*' campaign), this is yet another example of American Express relying on the status of art to convey their message. The allusion to a more popular piece of art, is due to the company's desire of projecting its products to other segments while keeping its core customers.

⁴⁰ Available at http://www.nytimes.com/2005/12/03/sports/othersports/03poker.html?_r=1 [last accessed on September 1st 2011]

⁴¹ Available at <http://www.dogsplayingpoker.org/stuff/> [last accessed on September 3rd 2011]



(Image: NY Times)

Figure 4.4: 'A Friend in Need' by C. M. Coolidge. One of the paintings in the 'Dogs Playing Poker' collection.

4.2.3. Absence

Another interesting feature in the ad in **Figure 6.3** is the presence of a central chair at the table and the fact that although it is empty, there are poker chips, cards and a glass positioned in front of it, working as an index to signalize that there is a third person playing the game, but whom is not in the picture. Williamson (1978, 78-9) explains that this empty space is supposed to be filled by the reader, hiding the differences between them and the 'imaginary' individual constructed by the advert. Following this argument, we can assume that the simplicity of the kitchen, the fact that there are no hi-tech utensils or fancy furniture, is done in order to connect the brand to another segment, rather than the usual high-end ones, as it does not portray their truth. And although it does not portray DeGeneres' truth either, her presence here is done in order to convey her as a popular TV persona and not her private persona. The portrayal of DeGeneres in this simple homey scenario aims to actively disassociate her from the glamour usually equated to the lifestyle of celebrities – it shows her as a normal person and in doing so, enabling others to relate to what is being depicted in the ad and consequently the American Express card. **Figure 4.3** is a very good

example of the usage of framing in advertising to create a link between the fantasy realm and reality (van Leeuwen: 2005, 13-4).

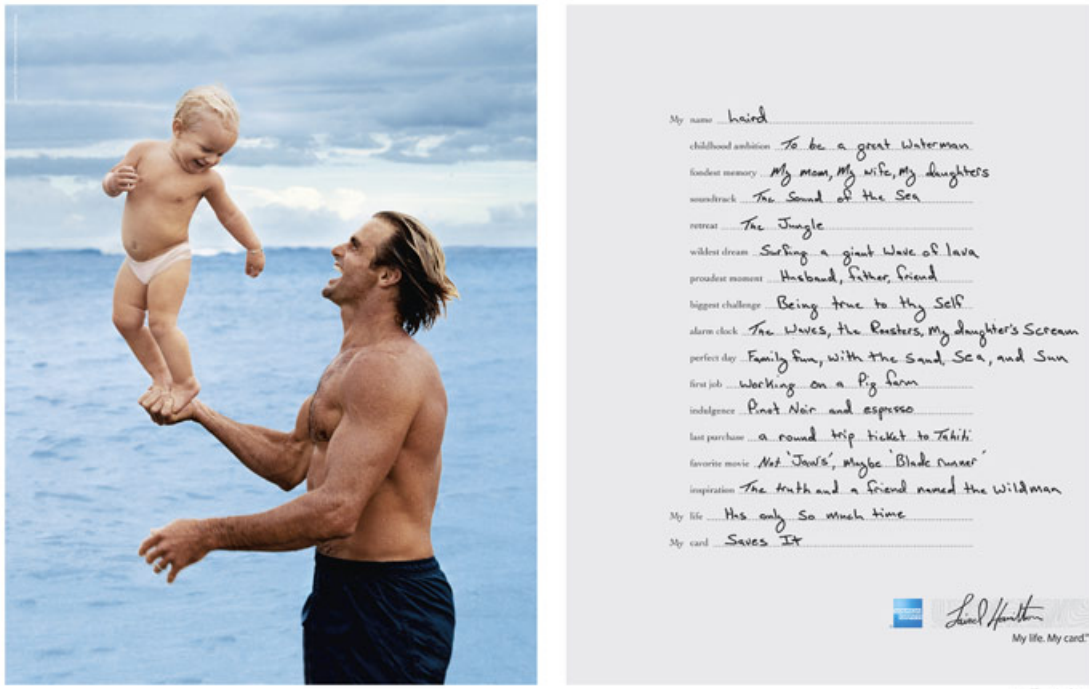
Another element that is absent from the adverts of '*My Life. My Card.*' campaign is the product itself. This is done in order to make all the signs in the ad signify the product, while its absence is always meant to be filled. The absent elements in the ads are always defined by the elements that are present. According to Williamson (1978, 81-2), the absence of the product is done in order to create its contingency in the narrative – it is the given cues, the story around it, that gives it value and significance. In **Figure 6.3**, this is reinforced by the white stripe with DeGeneres signature, alluding that what we see in the ad and the American Express card are interchangeable, that the joyful moments in *her* life are only possible because of *her* card. The same happens with the other ads of the campaign.

Another compelling point to introduce into this discussion is that DeGeneres is openly gay, which may imply that the empty chair, the absent person, may be a woman. In this possible reading, we see the American Express company reaching out to a minority group (i.e. the gay community) in the hope of conveying the company (and cards) as open minded and unprejudiced – a company that is there for its customers regardless of their sexuality and private affairs. In this context, **Figure 6.3** becomes a visual metaphor for an 'alternative' lifestyle, representing the plasticity of the company - another example of how American Express' uses advertising in brand morphing (Kates and Goh: 2003). The use of the visual metaphor in this context is to help readers come up with their own conclusions (Phillips and McQuarrie: 2002, 61). By doing this, American Express has found a subtle way to include the gay community as recipients of their message without offending their more conservative customers with a more direct approach (i.e. if DeGeneres' wife were to take the empty seat). By excluding them from the ad, they are actually including them in the message.

4.2.4. Memories and Values

In the second phase of this campaign a questionnaire was inserted, in which the celebrities introduced themselves and were asked about their daily lives and their most important memories. The purpose of the questionnaire was to strengthen the

connection between consumers and the company⁴². By reading the questionnaire, the reader gets an insight into the celebrity's life, both past and present, and the important role played by the American Express card in allowing them to conciliate their busy, demanding jobs with their family and their personal lives.



(Image: Effie.org)

Figure 4.5: 'My Life. My Card.' ad⁴³ featuring American world-class surfer Laird Hamilton and his daughter Reece Viola.

On the ad in **Figure 4.5**, big-wave surfer Laird Hamilton is shown playing with his daughter on the left, and in the following page is the questionnaire filled in with his handwriting. In it, seventeen questions⁴⁴ were answered, such as 'fondest memory', 'last purchase' and 'wildest dream'. An emphasis is put on the very first question (*My name*) and in the last two (*My life* and *My card*), by the repetition of the

⁴² Available at <http://katewilentz.com/amex1.html> [last accessed on April 2nd 2011].

⁴³ The body copy reads: "My name: Laird / childhood ambition: to be a great waterman / fondest memory: my mom, my wife, my daughters / soundtrack: the sound of the sea / retreat: the jungle / wildest dream: surfing a giant wave of lava / proudest moment: husband, father, friend / biggest challenge: being true to thy self / alarm clock: the waves, the roasters, my daughters' scream / perfect day: family fun, with the sand, sea and sun / first job: working on a big farm / indulgence: pinot noir and espresso / last purchase: a round trip ticket to Tahiti / favorite movie: not 'Jaws', maybe 'Blade Runner' / inspiration: the truth and a friend named the Wildman / My life: has only so much time / My card: saves it"

⁴⁴ Some of the questions may change from ad to ad.

possessive pronoun ‘my’ at the beginning of the statements (i.e. the rhetorical schemed known as anaphora) as well as by the alignment of the questions. The emphasis on ‘My’ preceding the words name, life and card, connects all those words, creating the allusion that all those elements are deeply and interchangeably linked.

The questionnaire traces a parallel between Hamilton’s life and his card, illustrating in a few words his successful life story – from his childhood ambition to be a great waterman, to his values as a family man who values the truth, to his lifestyle, drinking pinot noir and espresso and travelling around the world. In the end, Hamilton is asked to sum up both his life and his card – ‘My Life: has only so much time. My card: saves it.’, he concludes. Those two simple phrases emphasize the link between his life and his card, remitting to the slogan of the campaign. By bringing out the cliché that life is short and stating that his card helps him save time, Hamilton is conveying the American Express as a card that understands the value of time and allows him to spend more time with his family. This leads to another interesting point – it is not specified in the ad exactly how the American Express card helps Hamilton save time. As previously said, the purpose of the ‘*My Life. My Card.*’ campaign was to bring the brand closer to the consumers, making the details about services and offers somewhat irrelevant. The main message of the campaign is that not only does the American Express company understand their cardmembers’ needs, they also make sure those needs are taken care of. By not specifying exactly how the company does that, they enable the readers to come up with their own conclusions, allowing a variety of possible answers.

Although the questions in-between (especially the ones about Hamilton’s experiences and memories, *his* life) may evoke a certain nostalgic feeling in the reader, nostalgia here (or in the entire campaign for that matter) is not used for its regular function. Nostalgia, as defined in the New Oxford American Dictionary, is ‘a sentimental longing or wistful affection for the past, typically for a period or place with happy personal associations’ and is often used as an advertising tool with the purpose of generating a positive attitude towards an ad or a company through association (Muehling and Sprott: 2004). However, in the case of the ‘*My Life. My Card.*’ ads, it is rather used as a way to connect the reader to the celebrity and consequently the company. As previously discussed, by reading the copy in **Figure 6.5**, the reader gets to know yet another part of Hamilton’s life, a private and more ordinary part, with which most of us can identify – we have all had childhood dreams

and still remember our fondest moments. It is even possible that the reader can identify something in common with Hamilton, like the same favorite movie, creating a bond between them. Showing another side of celebrities makes us relate to them and ultimately, to the American Express card.

In the questionnaires, the different celebrities feature different aspects of the American Express cards and how their cards fit their exact needs. In **Figure 4.3**, Ken Watanabe wraps it up: ‘*My life*: is about taking my own path. *My card* is American Express.’ With this statement, Watanabe links taking his own path with his American Express card, thus implying the condition that he can only live his life on his own terms, due to his American Express card. Although the answers to the questions in between vary among the different celebrities, they all remit to the same premise – the American Express card allows them to live their best life, which is a balance of their busy professional lives and their personal lives with their families. This is yet another way in which the company tries to connect with the readers. In our society, as Wernick (Wernick in Nava et al [ed.]: 1997, 219) puts it, ‘[t]he growing disconnection between self, family, locale and country has attenuated the experience of home itself as a single nurturing and self-defining center’. So what the campaign tries to do is show the reader that it is possible to reconnect to your home and family and that all it takes is an American Express card.

4.2.5. Summary: Humanizing Celebrities

‘My Life. My Card.’ (2004 -2007) represents a shift in the way advertising portrays the American Express card. Although the campaign also uses celebrities as the main appeal, the way they convey the message to the audience is very different: the situations in which they appear are completely different from the glamorous and artsy ones seen in the previous analysis. Instead, it follows the brand’s image changing process initiated by *‘Do More’* in 2000, in order to attract a more diverse segment. In this campaign we see the focus shift from leisure as a way of escaping from busy, chaotic lives, to exotic destinations and high-profile activities and to leisure time spent with our families, emphasizing ‘the little things’ in life. This, as explained by Goldman and Papson (1994, 30), can be seen as an answer to the growing skepticism of viewers towards advertising, due to the great discrepancy between the idealized

world in ads compared with everyday life. Concepts such as ‘authenticity’ were questioned, and the access given to celebrities’ personal lives became the representation of a new form of realism (ibid. 27).

It is interesting to compare how absence is used in this specific ad with how it was used in the ad featuring Loren (**Figure 2.1**), from the ‘*Membership Has Its Privileges*’ (1987 – 1996) campaign. Although both ads use absence to create a connection with the reader, they use this element in very different ways. While absence was used in the ad featuring Sophia Loren as an invitation to male readers, the invitation in the ad featuring DeGeneres is not specific, allowing both male and female readers to take a seat in the empty chair. Although both female, the ads depict the two women in very distinct ways – while the ad featuring Loren clearly makes use of her as a signifier of classic beauty, sensuality and an object of the male gaze; the one featuring DeGeneres shows her with her typical boyish, playful charm, and uses her as a signifier of fun. **Figure 2.1** uses absence in a subtle way, requiring the reader to pay close attention to the cues – the male reader is slowly seduced by the different elements present in the ad. On the other hand, **Figure 4.3** makes use of the same aspect quite bluntly, with the presence of an empty chair – an open invitation to a casual, friendly poker game, which is also emphasized by the fact that the background connotes a cozy, relaxed ambiance. All the elements within the ads help the construction of the narrative of you – you are the absent person.

4.3. ‘Realise the Potential.’ (2009 – 2012)

‘*Realise the Potential.*’ was launched in 2009 and is the latest global campaign up to date (2012) for the American Express card. What is striking and compelling about this campaign is that it signalizes the entrance of American Express into the digital era, which can be noticed by the clear fact that the campaign has been deeply influenced by the introduction of digital technology and the Internet as a new mass medium. Its entire layout (i.e. choice of colors, typography, design, etc.) automatically remits the reader to a digital domain. For the first time in their campaigns, a website was specially designed in order to complement the print and TV campaigns while its address was featured in the ads. The website allowed the readers to visit and check out for themselves the full advantages of the American Express cards, as well as

marked the introduction of the company's cross-media ad-campaigns in the online era. Also, all the adverts (both print and TV spots) were made available at the webpage of the company's advertising agency, Ogilvy & Mather (Ogilvy.co.uk). Although it is not the focus of this research, it is very interesting to note that both the print ads, the TV spots as well as the campaign's website follow the exact same layout, giving the campaign a sense of continuity. This synergy and fluidity among different media platforms, as pointed out by Bolin (Bolin in Storsul and Stuedahl (ed.): 2007, 238), is a consequence of digitalization, which has not only redesigned the media landscape, but also allowed their functions and forms to be interchanged. It is also very interesting to note that this is the first campaign not to feature celebrities in either TV nor print ads, featuring colorful digital illustrations instead. As mentioned in Chapter 2, this campaign focuses on the advantages of having an American Express card, encouraging the public to find out more about the company's services.

The campaign is a call to action. It asks consumers to realize the potential of having an American Express card, especially in times of financial restrictions, when consumers are being asked to be more careful with their purchases. The adverts are composed by vivid colors, contrasted by the black background, projecting the company's image in a contemporary and fun way. They each represent a different service offered by the company and reassure customers of the commitment between the company and their consumers, while merely hinting what the service might be (Ogilvy.co.uk)⁴⁵. The realization of the potential in having an American Express is left to the consumer, as he has to fill in the gaps. In the following pages, I will discuss the main elements used in this campaign.

4.3.1. Rhetorical Figures

Rhetorical figures are characterized by their artful deviation of the literal meaning (McQuarrie and Mick 1996) and are deliberately used in this campaign. McQuarrie and Mick (1999, 40) argue that in semiotic terms, the presence of rhetorical figures increase the pleasure of the text due to its ambiguity, which allows for the possibility of multiple interpretations and the rewarding feeling of unraveling the

⁴⁵ Available at <http://www.ogilvy.co.uk/blog/bold-new-mould-breaking-blue-dot-campaign-for-amex-breaks-tonight/> [last accessed on March 8th 2011]

riddle. Consequently, it is more probable that readers will regard the adverts with rhetorical figures more positively, making the existing conceptual links stronger in the readers' memories. As rhetorical figures are used in all the adverts of this campaign, I will use **Figure 4.6** and **Figure 4.8** to illustrate how the use of rhetorical tropes help create meaning for the American Express cards in the different phases of the campaign.



(Image: Ogilvy.co.uk)

Figure 4.6: This 'Realise the Potential.' (2009 – 2011) ad shows some pieces of laundry drying out on a drying cord. The copy reads: 'Our service is as personal as it comes. One of us, and only one of us, will sort out whatever you need sorting out. However long that may take.' It is followed by the campaign's internet address americanexpress.co.uk/potential. The ad ends with the campaign signature and the iconic American Express Green Card.

Figure 4.6 shows the illustration of some colorful clothing on a drying hanger as the headline, which is also hanging among the clothes, reads: 'If our service was any more personal we'd be doing your laundry'. The copy says 'Our service is as personal as it comes. One of us, and only one of us, will sort out whatever you need sorting out. However long that may take.', followed by the link to the company's web site. The headline makes usage of the rhetorical trope called *hyperbole* (i.e. the rhetorical trope that is characterized by the use of exaggerating terms for the purpose

of intensity)⁴⁶, which is used in order to emphasize how personal the services offered by the company are. The copy uses the rhetorical scheme called *repetition*, in order to highlight the rhetorical effect of the phrases (Leigh: 1994, 22), which can be seen both in the second and third sentences. The repetitions in the sentence ‘One of us, and only one of us’ emphasize the fact that once you have an American Express card, you will not have to go through different people in order to get the help you need, which is what usually happens when dealing with credit card companies. Instead, there is one designated person who takes care of everything, of whatever it is that you need (which is also emphasized by the repetition ‘sort out whatever you need sorting out’). In the case of **Figure 4.6**, the copy explains the trope illustrated by the headline, anchoring it to the rest of the ad and helping the reader understand exactly how personal the services offered by the company are. Although the use of rhetorical tropes has the intention of leaving the interpretation up to the reader, in **Figure 4.6**, the copy functions as a limiting device that leads the reader to interpret the ad as originally intended by the company. I will come back to this and other points later in the analysis.

Figure 4.8 is an example of the campaign’s second phase. As explained in Chapter 2, the second phase of ‘*Realise the Potential.*’ (2009 – 2012) focuses on the cardmember and not directly on the advantages that carrying the American Express card can provide. The ad’s verbal part is only composed by a headline, which tells the reader (i.e. *you*) that ‘life is a great big canvas’ and asks *you* to ‘throw all the paint at it *you* can’. The verbal text is a metaphor that tells us that life is full of wonderful opportunities and that it is up to us to take advantage of them. Although at a first glance the ad appears to be a harmless and optimistic message to the readers to enjoy life to the fullest, the real message conveyed by the ad is that taking this optimistic perspective on life is only possible for those who carry an American Express card. In **Figure 4.8** the card is pictured as the facilitator of the many opportunities life has to offer, because with an American Express card in hand there is nothing that hinders you from doing the things you want in your life. It is there for you by either providing financial help or by just helping you to get a hold of those coveted tickets to a sold out show, as promised by one of the campaign ads.

⁴⁶ Leigh (1994, 19)

From a visual perspective, we can also see the use of the same trope (metaphor), reinforcing and complementing the verbal message. **Figure 4.8** is composed as if the advert piece was itself a big black canvas with blue, yellow and red paints thrown on it, complementing the copy of the ad. The use of a rhetorical trope (metaphor) is done with the purpose of inviting the readers to take part in its interpretation and realizing the potential themselves. As explained in Chapter 3, tropes require an active process of interpretation by its receivers, because its meanings are incomplete and therefore should not be taken literally. By exploiting this stylistic device, the company is stimulating interaction between the reader and the company. By participating in the interpretation process, the readers are answering the call for action proposed by the campaign. The metaphor proposed by **Figure 4.8** also allows each reader to come up with their own answer, not imposing a correct answer to the reader, since the concept of ‘enjoying life to the fullest’ may mean something entirely different to reader A than reader B. The openness of metaphor and the fact that the ad has no copy to create an anchorage in the text, allows many different ways of ‘painting’ the big, great canvas of life, instead of limiting and imposing a given meaning upon the reader. The lack of limit imposed by the absence of copy, also alludes to the infinite possibilities of things you can use your American Express card for. And like a painting, the possible outcome can be as big and daring as one’s imagination. Nevertheless, it is also interesting to go back to Holt’s research discussed in Chapter 1 (cf.), in which he explains that for those with high cultural capital, consumption is intrinsically related to self-expression and subjectivity, which is exactly what **Figure 4.8** is seeking to bring out of the readers.

4.3.2. Hailing to the Reader

In order to connect the message in the advert to the readers, advertising must speak to them as individuals, while still addressing a group of people. As explained by Williamson (1978, 53), this is an essential point, since it reflects the needs of the people within our society to be kept separated. It also helps the prevalence of ideology, since it creates the illusion that we are individuals and that we exert control of our own lives. It helps sharing some beliefs, while making us believe that they are our own. In this context, for the message to be received and interpreted in the way

the advertisers envisioned, the reader must change places with the persona created by the ad, since meaning can only be given by the reader (ibid. 50). A product only means something because someone gives it meaning, thus only existing because someone exchanges it with their own individualities. In order to get this transference to happen, the reader must identify itself with the imaginary individual created by the ad, therefore the ad must somehow hail to us. One of the ways in which '*Realise the Potential.*' does that is by the use of assertive language (i.e. imperative form), as seen in **Figure 2.5** and **Figure 4.8**.

According to a study published by Kronrod et al. (2012), the use of assertive language in adverts of hedonic products increases compliance, due to communication expectations. The basis of this explanation is mood, because when people are in a positive mood, they expect higher assertiveness and less politeness due to a momentary detachment of perceived societal rules (ibid. 52) and the use of imperative helps the message to be perceived as advice, even though it comes from someone who is not pictured in the ad (Beasley and Danesi: 2002, 120). Whether a product is hedonic or utilitarian depends on how it is framed by advertising and the usage of assertive language plays a big role in it. By portraying its credit cards as the keys to those wonderful opportunities and infinite possibilities, American Express is draining its credit cards of their utilitarian nature and translating them as hedonic products. In '*Realise the Potential.*' (2009 – 2012), assertive language is not only used to reinforce the hedonic facet of the American Express cards, but also to generate compliance. This process can be explained as follows: *American Express cards portrayed as hedonic products (i.e. as the keys to new possibilities) → elevation of positive mood → expectations toward a more direct, assertive language increases → compliance (given that assertive language was used in the ad).*

Figure 4.9 illustrates yet another very interesting example of how American Express attempts to connect with its consumer targets, which signalizes a major change in the company's approach, which was enabled by the inception of the Internet as a mass medium. It is an interactive advert, where the reader can be a part of the campaign by simply visiting the webpage and typing in their name. The reader can then either choose to share his own personalized advert on Facebook or receive it through their e-mail. In this relatively new socio-technological setting, consumers are not only the recipients of the message, but active producers. This participation allows

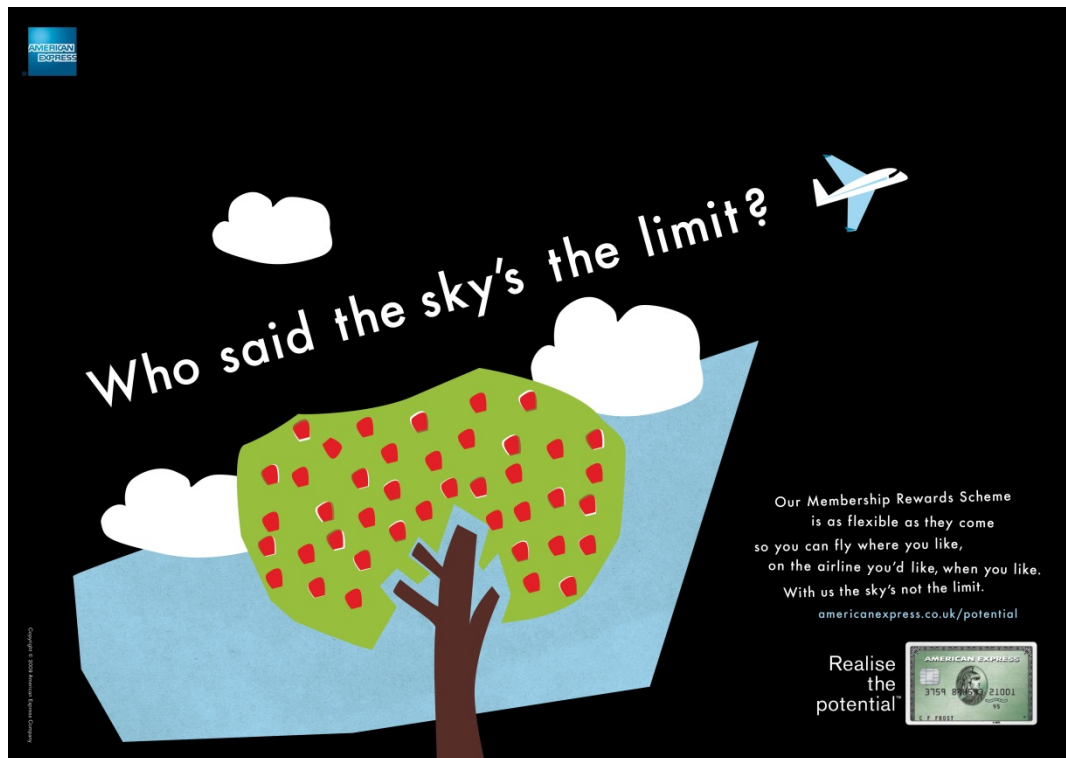
them to be a part of the brand experience through shared meaning making (Morrison and Skjulstad in Storsul and Stuedahl (ed.): 2007, 218). Another interesting complementary point in this discussion is brought up by Aalen (2013, 132). According to the author, social network sites are very important channels for word-of-mouth marketing (WOMM), which means that by simply sharing their personalized advert on Facebook, readers are actively spreading American Express' message while generating conversations ('buzz') around the product/company for free. Another important aspect of WOMM in social network sites, such as Facebook, is that people are more prone to believe their friends and families' opinions than the opinions of companies.

This approach also follows one of the campaign's main goals, which is to reassure their cardmembers that they can count on their card in a period of difficulties, this specific ad connects with the readers on a deeper level and hails to them by using their first name. This practice personifies the company and tightens the bond between it and the reader. The ad conveys to them that American Express knows who they are and that the company is there for them whenever they need, which comes in handy in our current financial crisis. As pointed out by Evans and Schmalensee (2005: 1), 'the digits – with their links to you – are what matter. How they are stored and transmitted is a detail.' This leads to yet another possible reading, the digits can be seen as an allusion, an indexical representation of the digitalization revolution process, where information is converted into binary codes (i.e. sequences of the numbers 0 and 1) in order to allow them to be shared among different media platforms (Bolin in Storsul and Stuedahl (ed.): 2007, 238-239). In this perspective, American Express uses the new medium in order to assure its cardmembers that they are still their main priority in this time of change.

Figure 4.9 in particular can also be seen as an answer to the growing resistance created by people against advertising. In Western cultures, people are constantly exposed to advertising messages from a very young age, which contributes to the adoption of a blasé attitude towards them. According to Speck et al. (1997, 61-62), 'people [may] avoid ads by cognitive, behavioral, and mechanical means', which in print media can be translated as ignoring the ads (cognitive) and simply flipping the pages with the ads (behavioral). By allowing the reader to participate in the construction and creation of the ad, American Express is denying

the possibility of those negative responses. This engaging aspect of online advertising is one of the major features that digitalization brings into play.

At the same time, the copy strengthens the connection between the company and its cardmembers by reassuring them that they are more than just numbers – which signify their credit cards and their data in their system. The reader's name is composed of numbers which come together in order to personify them – and not only is the ad talking to the reader as a part of a group (i.e. as cardmembers or potential ones), but as an individual. It gives them a sense of personalization and that the American Express card fill their exact needs. According to Williamson's argument (1978: 53), this is how ideology 'recruits' or 'transforms' individuals into subjects. It directs the individual's attention to what is being said, by speaking *directly* to it. By addressing the reader directly, advertising transcends its nature as a mass medium (van Leeuwen: 2005, 150). Williamson (ibid.) goes on to argue that the fact that the ad appellate to us as singular persons is an answer of the social need we have to be kept separated as individuals, which is ever more prevailing in interactive online ads, such as **Figure 4.9**, that allows the reader to construct the ad and not just the meaning and share them as their own work. Thus the ad conveys to us a sense of uniqueness, while at the same time performing the same function for all others who come in contact with it. In her own words (ibid. 51), '*naming*, the use of a proper name, is where the classification ends; it is the ultimate signifier of difference, of uniqueness.'



(Image: Ogilvy.co.uk)

Figure 4.7: Another example of the campaign's first phase adverts. The copy reads: 'Our Membership Rewards Scheme is as flexible as they come so you can fly where you like, on the airline you'd like, when you like. With us the sky's not the limit.'

4.3.3. Color

Although color is present and relevant in their own right in all the campaigns (and in pretty much all advertising for that matter), it is only in this campaign that it becomes one of the main visual elements and the starting point of the analysis. This has to do with its full use as a signifier. Color is the primary appealing element used in the campaign '*Realise the Potential.*' (2009 – 2012) and its freshness and boldness clearly connote the new media. In advertising, color is primarily used as a visual element, in order to strategically bring out certain emotions from the reader. Although many scholars have theorized and come to a common denominator in relation to the connection of certain colors to specific emotions, the simple fact remains that it is subjective to personal and cultural factors, being described by Gage (2000, 11) as actually being 'a visual *experience*'⁴⁷. Nevertheless, there are some regularities in its motivation and use by sign makers according to their needs and in that context, color becomes a semiotic resource like any other (Kress and van Leeuwen: 2002, 345). In

⁴⁷ My italics.

order to analyze this element, I will mostly rely on the framework drawn by Kress and van Leeuwen (ibid.), in which they analyze some of those culturally and historically produced regularities regarding the use of color, in order to work towards a grammar of its communicative functions. According to the authors (ibid. 347), although the dominant discourse of color is related to its effects, its communicative function is not constricted to it, since it is used to denote many different things such as people, places, things, brands, etc.

According to Kress and van Leeuwen's (ibid. 355-58) framework, there are six features of color that should be taken into consideration when analyzing its meanings: (1) *value*, i.e. the gray scale beginning from light (white) to dark (black); (2) *saturation*, i.e. the scale from highly saturated to the most pastel manifestations, which help convey temperature effects; (3) *purity*, i.e. the scale that goes from maximum 'purity' (common single named colors, such as green and brown) to maximum 'hybridity' (mixed colors, such as blue-green and cyan); (4) *modulation*, i.e. the scale from fully modulated (colors with different shades and textures) to flat (such as seen in comic strips); (5) *differentiation*, i.e. the scale from monochrome to a diverse use of colors and (6) *hue*, i.e. the scale from blue to red. By applying this theory to the campaign, we can conclude that its colors are highly saturated, which according to the framework set out by the authors, can be seen as 'positive, exuberant and adventurous'; the 'pure' bright reds, blues and yellows (especially in **Figure 4.8**), are a reference to the Mondrian color scheme, which are key signifiers of the ideology of modernity (ibid.). The use of flat colors, i.e. generic colors, can be understood as simple and bold, but in a positive way 'expressing the essential quality of things' (ibid.), while the high differentiation (i.e. the presence of many different colors in the ads) reinforces the campaign's adventurousness. The fact that we can see both extremes of the hue scale, blue and red, in most of the ads, gives the campaign some balance between cold and warm associations, such as far/near, light/heavy, etc.

The campaign is composed by single and double page ads, with white letters contrasting against a black background. Although, as pointed out by Kress and van Leeuwen (ibid. 357), the 'real' meaning of colors as abstract signifiers cannot be instituted, the color black is commonly associated with elegance, power and formality, and gives the feeling of perspective and depth. This is particularly well exploited in **Figure 4.7**, where the blackness of the background helps reinforce the allusion of unlimitedness. Although a black background can make readability

difficult, when contrasted with white text it makes it come forward and other colors stand out (ColorWheelPro.com)⁴⁸. In **Figure 4.8**, the black background helps projecting the colors blue, yellow and red, making them pop out of the ad. It is interesting to notice that although blue is the least ‘aggressive’ color from the three being used in the ad, being normally associated with calmness and tranquility, is the one that actually attracts the viewers’ attention. In **Figure 4.9**, the color blue is present in the *F*, the first letter of the name, thus the first one that catches our attention. The fact that it is the same color as the American Express logo helps to bring it out, redirecting our attention to it. If we pay close attention, we can see that this does not only happen in **Figure 4.8** and **Figure 4.9**, but in all the ads of ‘*Realise the Potential.*’ (2009 – 2011). The function of the color blue is to make the connection between the graphic part of the ad and the American Express company. As argued by Kress and van Leeuwen (2002: 349), in advertising the use of color repetition is used to ‘lend symbolic value to a product’, and in this case, it lends to the American Express card its modern, bold, daring symbolic value. American Express then, by borrowing its referent system from the present colors in the ads and their features, constructs the meaning of their product upon them. The concept of rhyme, a perceptive code, is used here to create a link between the color blue and the company’s logo.

The ad shown in **Figure 4.8**, an example of the campaign’s second phase, focuses on getting consumers to realize the potential within themselves instead of focusing on the advantages associated with having an American Express card. In this ad, we can see a high saturation of the colors, which stands for an intensity of feelings, enjoying life and not being timid, making the contrast among the different colors. All this is complemented by the copy in the ads, as we can see in the discussion bellow.

⁴⁸ Available at <http://www.color-wheel-pro.com/color-meaning.html> [last accessed on October 9th 2011]



(Image: Ogilvy.co.uk)

Figure 4.8: An example of the second phase of the campaign ‘*Realise the Potential*.’ (2009 – 2011), where the main focus is shifted from making the consumers realize the advantages of having the American Express card to realizing the potential within themselves.

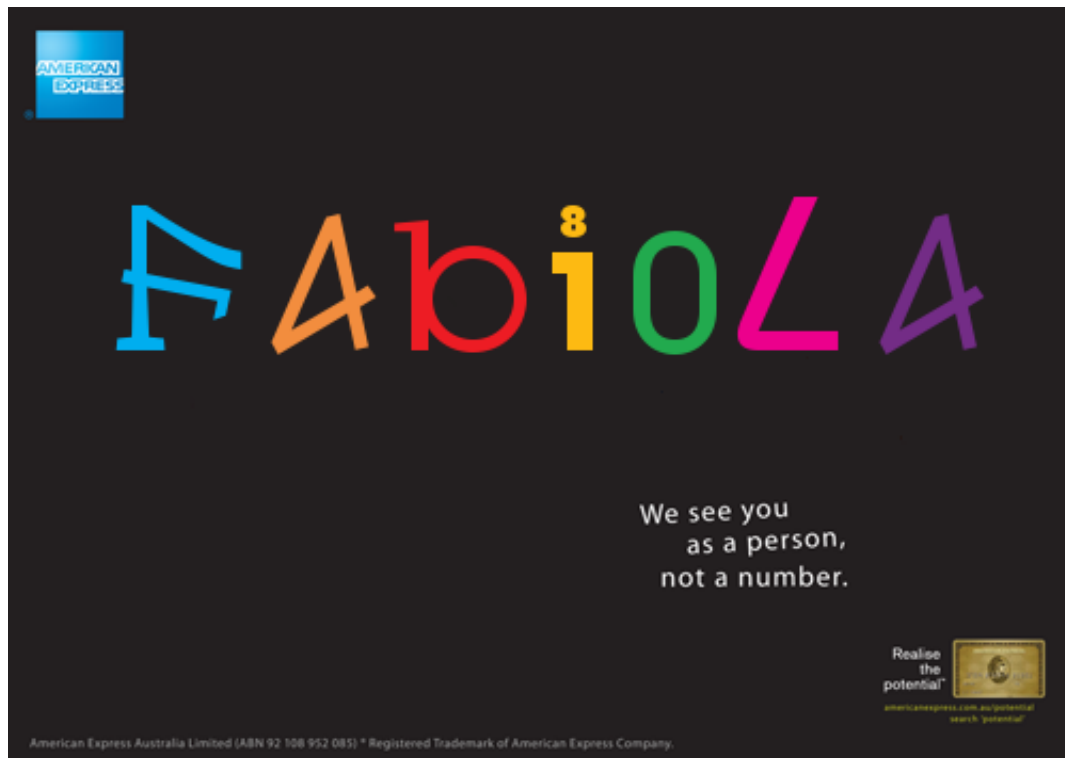
4.3.4. Typography

Another important element used in **Figure 4.9** to convey its message is typography, which is defined as ‘the art or skill of designing communication by means of the printed word.’ (Childers and Jass: 2002, 94). In print advertising, typography takes the place of the spoken word and is used in order to convey a given sentiment or brand/product personality. According to Williamson (1978: 95), with typography⁴⁹ ‘the advertisement reaches a final point in its imaginary joining of sign and referent’. Although referents are always absent from ads, typography puts together referent (i.e. numbers) and sign (i.e. the name of the consumer, in this case my own name ‘*Fabiola*’), by incorporating the referent in its material appearance.

As argued by van Leeuwen (2005, 29), typography has come from being a simple kind of art, which should not get in the way of the message in the early 1920’s, to being in increasing demand nowadays. That is to do with not only the fact

⁴⁹ Although in her work Williamson uses the term calligraphy, I made the decision to substitute the term for typography to avoid its usual association with handwriting.

that we find ourselves in a computer mediated time, where the need of writing is greater than ever, but also to the fact that typography has now been accepted as a type of communication in its own right. It expresses identities, while connecting images, graphics and letterforms (ibid.). Using a clever analogy, Childers and Jass (2002, 95) explain that the way typography works is by ‘dressing up’ words in costumes. Those costumes have the function of conveying a certain meaning, which is independent from the word it ‘dresses’. Typography can also serve as either a central or peripheral persuasion cue, depending on its relevance to the arguments in the copy. Using the same analogy to explain the ad in **Figure 4.9**, we can conclude that by ‘dressing up’ my name in a costume made of numbers, American Express is trying to show that to them, I am not just the number on my credit card, but I am in fact a person, I am Fabíola (as shown by the numbers that were arranged in order to resemble letters). As Evans and Schmalensee (2005, 1) put it, in the credit card business ‘the digits – with their link to [the consumer] – are what matters.’ So by seeing me as a person and recognizing that each customer is different and consequently has their own needs, the American Express company tries to set itself apart as a company, which priority is to cater to the specific needs of their cardmembers. At the same time, the meaning of the message, the fact that they see their cardmembers as persons and not numbers, is independent from the word itself, i.e. my name – the message is in the ‘clothes’ themselves, not the word being dressed up. If any other name had been used on the ad, the message would still be understood. However, the fact that it stimulates a deeper level of interaction between the company and their prospective/current customers and allows each of them to have their very own personalized advert, adds a certain amount of fun and charisma to the campaign. In that context, we can also conclude that the typography in **Figure 4.9** is used as a central persuasion cue, due to its relevance to the argument presented in the copy. The copy in the ad sums up what is showed by the headline, thus clarifying to the reader the choice of that specific typeface.



(Image: Realisethepotential.mobi)

Figure 4.9: My 'very own' personalized American Express ad featuring my name stylized with numbers. After visiting the webpage above, I got it sent to my personal e-mail address. It reads: "We see you as a person, not a number." and placed at the bottom is the campaign slogan and the *Gold Card*. At the top, we can see the company logo.

4.3.5. Focus on the Advantages

In the first phase of '*Realise the Potential.*', we see a twist in the message focus – instead of picturing lifestyles that are associated with carrying an American Express card, we see the advantages that it can actually offer to its cardmembers. It is the first campaign that almost purely relies on the copy to convey its message instead of the famous iconic celebrity pictures. This campaign informs the reader about the advantages, almost in the same instructional format of the ads in the beginning of print advertising, focusing on the tangible qualities of the American Express card (i.e. services and rewards), rather than the intangible ones (i.e. as a status symbol or a key to success or associated with a lifestyle). As explained by Leiss et al. (2005, 552), advertising practitioners have changed the discourse from linking products to economic power to linking them to the new media (as seen in **Figure 4.9**) and cultural realm instead. **Figure 4.7** is an example of how the American Express card can turn basic, daily purchases into a pleasant traveling experience. The ad's headline asks the

reader an intriguing question, playing off the widely familiar saying that ‘the sky is the limit’ (i.e. the potential of a given thing or person is unlimited). The copy explains the headline by telling the reader that not only does the Membership Rewards program go much further than merely offering plane tickets (a very standard reward or discount deal offered by credit card companies), they even allow the cardmembers to choose their destination, the airline they want to fly with and when. The last sentence in the copy, (i.e. ‘with us the sky’s not the limit.’) sums up the message of the ad while implying that those conditions are only offered by the Membership Rewards program, highlighting the advantages American Express has over its competitors. The copy helps the reader realize the potential of having an American Express card over the cards offered by other payment companies.

As seen in Chapter 2, in a market such as payment cards’ which has become more and more homogeneous, what really sets companies apart are the reward programs, which explains the focus shift in this campaign. Frequency programs (such as the American Express Membership Rewards) have become one of the most widely used marketing tools in order to keep customers and stimulate the usage of products (Kivetz and Simonson: 2002, 155). Although each company has a different reward program, their premise is the same: customers acquire points through purchases. In the case of the Membership Reward program, every time a cardmember uses the American Express card, he acquires points, which later can be exchanged for rewards, such as plane tickets, as seen in **Figure 4.7**. As explained by Kivetz and Simonson (ibid.), the way frequency programs work is by exploiting people’s urges to engage in efforts towards achieving future rewards, which has been confirmed by studies in the human behavior field. Also, it allows customers to experience hedonic consumptions, without feeling the guilt usually associated with it. When people claim hedonic or luxury rewards (e.g. plane tickets or beauty treatments) instead of utilitarian or necessity rewards (e.g. discounts at a grocery store or a free oil change for your car) they feel less guilty, because it is a matter of putting in effort as opposed to money into acquiring it. In that context, the purchase of the hedonic rewards is seen as an earned and well deserved self-gift and not an extravagance.

As previously said, the focus of ‘*Realise the Potential.*’ is on how cardmembers’ efforts (e.g. centralizing all their purchases to their American Express cards) can turn into hedonic experiences. This fact helps us draw out the targeting of the campaign, which aims at potential customers who are hard workers, who only

through devoted effort are able to enjoy this kind of indulgence, thus attracting the right potential customers while showing current ones the reason why they should take full advantage of their American Express card. Drawing on Weber's essay on protestant ethics, Kivetz and Simonson (ibid. 156) explain that the guilt associated with indulgence can be justified by Protestantism's interpretation of capitalism, in which the earning of money and frugal spending are seen as ethical duties. The simple fact that a certain amount of effort is demanded from the (potential) cardmembers is enough to make them feel as though they earned the prize in the end. The focus on a hedonic reward such as plane tickets may require even more effort than a utilitarian reward, which decreases the guilt of choosing hedonic rewards. We can see that guilt and effort are indirectly proportional, as one increases when the other decreases.

All in all American Express is conveying that the loyalty and efforts of their customers are not only appreciated, but also fairly rewarded. By focusing on the advantages of having an American Express card, the company is trying to set itself apart from its competitors, while showing the reader how the American Express card goes further than just providing credit, realizing the potential of having an American Express card.

4.3.6. Summary: Appealing to the Reader in the Convergence Era

'Realise the Potential.' (2009 – 2012) represents a major change in how American Express uses advertising to communicate with their targets. One of the main goals of this campaign has been to challenge the readers to accomplish their potential, which can be seen as a frightening thing to do in a time of economic instability, by reassuring them that they can count on their American Express cards. In order to achieve that, the adverts reached out the readers by directly calling them out to take action and live their lives to the fullest, as opposed to the more indirect approaches seen in the past campaigns. *'Realise the Potential.'* (2009 – 2012) is about **you** – the reader.

The most notable occurrence is how the concepts of convergence and digitalization are so intrinsic in this campaign. As explained by Jenkins (2006, 16), the concept of convergence concerns a change in how media is both produced and

consumed and is quite evident in *'Realise the Potential.'* (2009 – 2012). The campaign was obviously influenced by the massive spread of digital technology and the Internet, not only by the way it tries to reach out to the reader (e.g. **Figure 4.9**), but also by its aesthetical composition (i.e. the use of bright colors, typography, layout, etc.). Because of digitalization, the reader is able to create his own print advert, if he chooses to print it, or his own online advert, if he chooses to share it on Facebook instead, or both. Since its inception, the Internet has been seen by businesses as 'a means to speak directly to consumers' (Leiss et al.: 2005, 343), which quickly aroused the interest of marketers and advertisers. What is particularly special about the advent of the Internet for the American Express company, is that it made it possible for them to both reach a broader audience – especially its early adopters the young, wealthy and Western (ibid.), who fit the company's main target profiles – as well as to better segment it. As previously said, to reach this specific audience has been one of the company's goal since the launching of *'Do More.'* in 1996.

The implementation of digital technology has had major implications for communication processes in general, especially for advertising, as will be discussed in the following chapter.

Chapter 5

Research Findings & Implications

In order to keep up with the changes in consumer behavior and the new demands in the credit card market, the American Express company has come a long way from portraying various celebrities and making use of their referent system (i.e. what they mean to us) such as in their first ad-campaigns, and to the animated, colorful and even interactive ads we saw in *'Realise the Potential.'* What we see in the first campaign of the analysis, *'Membership Has Its Privileges'* is a clear evocation of myths within our contemporary Western society in order to awaken our desire of the American Express cards. What was interesting about this specific technique was in how they evoked the myth of women as the weaker gender in our society and how it works on different levels to appeal to both male and female readers. They used two famous women – Italian actress Sophia Loren and Brazilian actress Sonia Braga – and although they portray them in sensual situations and outfits and as objects of the male gaze, in Berger's words, they both have an empowering aura surrounding them. Both are successful actresses in charge of their lives and sexuality. They have conquered not only the respect and admiration of both men and women, but also the right to carry an American Express card – which in the ads summarize their success and accomplishments. What is also intriguing is the fact that those ads were circulated in 1975, a point in time when women were still fighting for their rights and individualities. In this perspective, the company acknowledged societal changes and tried to use it in the campaign as a way to gain the trust and sympathy of consumers. I have to stress here, that the target of the American Express cards are the affluent and cultural elites, which are normally the segment that are engaged in such sociopolitical issues. This reinforces the role of advertising in not only perpetuating ideologies, but also conducting social behavior in times of societal change, as discussed in Chapter 1. Pre-approved credit embodied in an American Express card here is also seen as a sign of freedom from the constraints imposed by society – either by 'returning to nature'

and escaping to an exotic getaway or by conquering your own place in society. Cultural capital is also used in this campaign as a way of limiting the decoding of the message to its main target.

In *'My Life. My Card.'*, although still using celebrities and their referent systems to create sign value, the company tried a different approach. Celebrities were no longer seen as unreachable and 'sacred'. Instead, their human side was emphasized by their portrayal in mundane activities and by the forms filled in by them in the second phase of the campaign. By reading this form, the reader is able to establish a connection with the celebrity, since it shows a more vulnerable side of them, the one that is not in the spotlight. This supposedly shows how crucial the American Express card is in helping them conciliate their busy careers with their family lives, and how without it they would not be able to appreciate those special moments with the ones they love. These are problems brought about by industrialization and new challenges of modern times (e.g. demanding hours of work, business trips across the globe, etc.) and are faced on a regular basis by the target consumers of the American Express cards. In this context, the ad-campaign aims at showing another side of the card as well – as a facilitator that not only makes those moments possible, but that understands how important those moments are, creating a human facet to the cards as well. Another way in which *'My Life. My Card.'* achieves this level of understanding is by inviting the reader to take place in the ads, not just as a spectator, but as an active participant in the meaning creation, thus allowing them to somehow personalize the American Express card to fit their own needs. This again reminds us to what has been argued by Williamsom (1978, 50-51) that although advertising aims at a broad audience, it reaches each person individually, which this campaign has taken to another level. The use of intertextuality in the first phase of this campaign is more complex than in *'Membership Has Its Privileges'*, since it requires a deeper level of reflexivity from the reader in contrast to the juxtaposition technique – in order to fully understand why Ellen DeGeneres would play cards with a dog, the readers would have to have been familiar with the C. M. Coolidge oil painting series 'Dogs Playing Poker', as well as DeGeneres as an animals' rights advocate. However, this knowledge was not crucial in the message interpretation. In this campaign, the advertisers are also trying reach out to more popular celebrities, such as DeGeneres (and Jerry Seinfeld in the *'Do More.'*, the campaign that preceded *'My Life. My*

Card.’) in order to appeal to another segment, while trying to keep control over its image and cater to its current customers.

The final campaign in the analyzed sample was *‘Realise the Potential.’* (2009 – 2012), which marked a huge transition in The Cards’ campaigns history by introducing the company into the digital era. From the use of a colorful layout to the direct approach used in the body texts, *‘Realise the Potential.’* was mainly about hailing to the readers and grabbing their attention in a similar way as what we see on banners featured on websites. What was very interesting in this campaign is that not only has it completely changed the approach used to connect with the readers by not featuring any celebrities, but it has also introduced a deeper level of personalization and interaction, as we see in **Figure 4.9**. These features enabled by digitalization have completely revolutionized the communication process as a whole, especially advertising – now advertising practitioners are finally able to communicate with their audience in an single basis, thus catering to our needs of being kept apart as individuals.

Although the purpose behind modern advertising has never truly changed, it has always been in a constant state of adaptation to better reach target audiences. Just as print revolutionized the advertising production in the 15th century, not only allowing it to reach the masses, but also changing the way the message was sent to the audience, for the past two decades we have been seeing the Internet slowly following the same steps. Social networking websites, such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter are not simply used by the general public, but also by politicians, celebrities and companies, and have become important tools in ‘spreading the word’ and creating a ‘buzz’ around people and products. This characteristic of social media has been actively exploited by advertising and marketing practitioners, who now rely on consumers’ knowledge of such activities as a way to engage their participation in the construction of products sign value, as well as in the message production process itself (Morrison and Skjulstad in Østerud et al. (ed.): 2012, 206), as seen in Chapter 4. As pointed out by Jenkins (2006, 14), old media are not being replaced by the new media, but are rather having their functions rethought in order to adapt to the introduction of new technology. Companies such as Nokia are now engaging their consumers to produce videos using and featuring their products (cf. Morrison and Skjulstad in Storsul and Stuedahl (ed.): 2007) and share them online on social

networking sites. What we see here is the blurring of the different media into one gigantic interconnected platform.

Despite the initial hype, the Internet has not yet proven to be a very efficient advertising medium, working better as a complementary tool to print and television in cross-media campaigns (ibid.). Content can now be tailored to fit very specific consumption patterns at a very low cost, which allows the creation of a more segmented audience. According to Leiss et al. (2005, 345), the Internet's relevance for advertising lies in the fact that it has introduced a new way of reaching consumers, while delivering messages and products in a more segmented and individualized way, what marketers call 'one to one marketing'. This has shifted the focus from getting the audience's attention at any cost (i.e. through the use of banners and pop-up ads) to creatively stimulating interaction with the message, which is what we see in **Figure 4.9**. It is in this setting that the transformation of consumers into producers happens – they are now invited to take an active part in the production of mediated content. This was enabled by the process of digitalization, i.e. the fact that now users are able to send information across different platforms and the low cost of its production. In this new setting, personalization and interactivity have become key words (Doyle: 2002, 149).

It is important to stress here that most of the research done about digitally mediated advertising has been done on its patterns of use, loyalty, duration of access and click-through rates (Morrison and Skjulstad in Østerud et al. (ed.): 2012, 205), thus leaving the subject of persuasion mostly unexplored, which is believed to be due its complexity of semiosis and for being a somewhat new approach. With the introduction of a new medium, new sets of tools are needed in order to analyze its power in influencing the decision making process towards a certain product or service, so studies on this relatively new subject should be strongly encouraged.

There are many potential facets of digitally mediated advertising for a researcher to choose from. From the more conventional side of the scale starting with viral marketing and advertising through services like Instagram, a photo stream sharing site and application, to digital word of mouth through social media like Twitter and Facebook by virtue of likes and recommendations, there is still a tremendous digital expanse of untapped fertile ground that needs looking into. For example, the migration and use of hashtags from Twitter onto other services like Facebook, to interactive and personalization elements in marketing campaigns, and

more exotic viral campaigns that present puzzles or clues (e.g. Curiosity: what's inside the cube?⁵⁰). In video games, there is an emerging trend regarding downloadable content which expand game worlds or game functionality with items developed at the behest of a sponsor. For example, several of Electronic Arts' games such as '*SimCity (2013)*' sport optional content. In *SimCity*, a city simulator game from Maxis/EA, the player can download a Nissan Leaf charging station that gives their virtual citizens electric cars which produce less pollution and make citizens happier. According to a report published by Zacks Equity Research (Zacks.com⁵¹) on June 26th 2013, downloadable sponsored content has become a significant source of revenue for game companies and have helped keep players happy and sell more games. In a similar concept, companies can also buy billboard space or product placements inside virtual worlds as seen in EA's '*Need For Speed*' series⁵².

Other companies now police the internet for blogs, discussion forums or articles that mention their company and products, and seek people out to solve any problems they might have had as a form of brand building.

Time and again we see that the future of digital marketing and advertising lies in interactivity, personalization and personal service. As we saw in the first chapter, advertising is connected to concepts of ideology and the individual. With economic and technological growth come new advertising challenges and opportunities. It will be interesting to see if American Express in the near future makes the leap to ever newer digital platforms and how this communication will translate into their cross-media campaigns.

⁵⁰ Available at <http://www.22cans.com/stats/> [last accessed on June 30th 2013]

⁵¹ Available at <http://www.zacks.com/stock/news/102457/ea-releases-new-sims-3-dlc> [last accessed on June 30th 2013]

⁵² Available at http://advertising.about.com/od/promotions/a/prodplacegames_2.htm [last accessed on June 30th 2013]

Conclusion

The general purpose of this research has been to perform a poststructuralist textual analysis with a semiotic framework to explore how the print ad-campaigns of the American Express cards have emptied them of their primary purpose as pre-approved credit and transformed them into coveted commodities, thus creating their sign value.

In Chapter 1, I presented a brief background of our contemporary consumer culture, and situated advertising within this context to explain how it relates to the individual and the construction and perpetuation of ideologies within our contemporary Western society.

In Chapter 2, I focused on demonstrating the evolution of credit – from its raw form as a pure mechanism that allowed the insertion of countries into modernity, consequently laying the foundation for our contemporary Western consumer culture - to the inception of personal credit in its most modern shape as credit cards, allowing the participation of individuals that would otherwise have been barred. In the same chapter, I have also presented the chronology of the American Express print ad-campaigns to introduce the objects of research and illustrate the different purposes of each campaign, as well as how they try to adapt to the new consumer demands.

In Chapter 3, I went through the details of both methods and theoretical structure of my textual analysis as well as the short-comings I came across while gathering the materials. All these chapters aimed at laying out and preparing a theoretical groundwork for the analysis performed in Chapter 4.

In order to understand the techniques and mechanisms behind how the American Express cards' print ad-campaigns help create sign value for the products, I have briefly explained in Chapter 1 the communication model proposed by Hall (1980), in which he claims communication is a circuit, and that encoding (i.e. how the message is created by the addresser) and decoding (i.e. how the message is read by the addressee) are two distinct parts in the communication process, but that the former can somehow lead to a preferred reading or decoding. As argued by Goldman (1987, 694), the interpretation of a message, the creation of meaning and the production of sign value are processes that happen simultaneously. By decoding the American Express card ads the reader creates the cards' sign value. What advertising does is to

encode messages in order to enable its targets to decode them as envisioned by advertisers, consequently creating sign value for the product being advertised. This is what I explored with the textual analysis of the print ad-campaigns – to analyze how this process happens. By using a poststructuralist approach to textual analysis in conjunction with a semiotic framework, I was able to fully explore the meanings behind the signs used in the sample I have analyzed.

In the first and second campaigns in the sample, the company mainly uses celebrities and their referent systems to convey their message. However, with completely different approaches – at first, celebrities are portrayed as idealized models, mainly appealing to a restrictive group by exploiting their cultural capital, showing the American Express cards as the key to a selective club. Then, the company shows a different side of celebrities by exposing them in their daily, mundane activities, distancing them from the glamorized ideal normally associated with their celebrity lifestyles. At this point, the American Express card is portrayed as an instrument that allows people to conciliate their busy professional lives with what really matters: their family lives. Finally, deeply influenced by the digital revolution, the company immersed itself in the new medium and allowed the readers to create, print and/or share their own personalized print ad on Facebook, taking the concept of individualization and advertising to a whole different level and marking the introduction of the company into the digital/convergence era. Here, enhanced by the interactivity and personalization that were enabled by the online revolution, the American Express card is portrayed as a card that allows its customers to have it their own way – it is *your* card and *you* can count on it to achieve your wants and needs.

The results of this research have confirmed what has been vehemently argued throughout this work and others before it – that advertising, being a dynamic practice, changes with the socio-economic environment. The needs of the targets change constantly, so does advertising's approach, which keeps the need for creating literacy around this subject alive.

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